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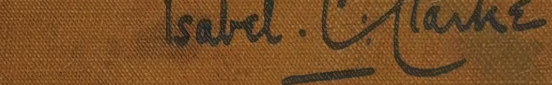

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THE CASTLE OF SAN SALVO

A NOVEL

BY

ISABEL C. CLARKE

Author of "Carina," etc.

NEW YORK, CINCINNATI, CHICAGO

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To

Violet Seymour

The Castle of San Salvo

CHAPTER I

I

LADY RYDAL had never had much in common with her elder daughter Charmian, now Mrs. Hugo Karslake, but of late they might have been observed in constant and intimate communication. Danger threatened a certain member of the family, and the tribal instinct, never so strong as when it is apparently dormant, had asserted itself and made them combine in a common front against the foe.

Charmian, from the matronly standpoint of three years of married life, punctuated by the arrival of a couple of babies, considered herself every whit as experienced as her mother, who was now only forty-five years old. It was she who had called Lady Rydal's attention to the danger, and had even supported her in those strong secret measures which had so perplexed and troubled Laura Rydal, the younger daughter of the house.

Of course it was all Darell Hayne's fault, Charmian declared, with a toss of what Hugo, quoting Rupert Brooke, sometimes called her "brown delightful head." Darell should never have brought his singularly attractive young cousin, Rex Forde, to the house. It was really bound to happen. Laura was eighteen—an age when a girl's susceptibilities are generally most sensitive and Rex was five and twenty and as handsome and attractive and extrava-

gant a young man as could be found in the whole of London.

Laura and her mother adored each other; they were on the best of terms. They seemed to have mutually waived the relationship of parent and child for the more suave and intimate one of sisters. Where such intimacy does occur it is perhaps the closest in the world, and capable of a tenacity that nothing can impair. They discussed all their trivial happenings with a complete frankness that contributed to the perfect harmony of their joint lives. This fact had often filled Rex Forde's heart with a sense of dismay, for he realized that even if Lady Rydal conceivably kept any private matter from Laura, the girl was absolutely open with her mother. Since Charmian's marriage they had lived together in a wonderful atmosphere of love and sympathy. Rex, perceiving this, was aware that the task before him was one of superhuman difficulty. He had little money, and he possessed many extravagant tastes and moved in a rich and luxurious set. There was his salary of course—he was secretary to a well-known cabinet minister to whom he had managed to render himself moderately indispensable. But it was a position without much prospect; it didn't in fact lead to anything. Governments were no more immortal than the men who composed them. Rex knew instinctively that Lady Rydal was little likely to accept him as a suitor for her favorite daughter. She would want something more solid than what he was able to offer.

He had known so many independent, detached daughters who regarded their parents with a certain pitying contempt as essential but negligible beings now permanently relegated to the background of the landscape, and although he hadn't admired the attitude, considering that it lacked traditional respect and good-breeding, he some-

times found himself wishing that Laura possessed a little more of this modern spirit of independence and initiative. It would have made her far more easy to deal with. Her loyalty was an oddly inflexible quality with which he had wisely never attempted to interfere. But it was undoubtedly one of the many barriers that separated him now from Laura Rydal, and it bestowed upon her mother a more formidable power than she was perhaps aware of.

During the first months of their acquaintance he had rashly ventured to speak of his love. Categorically he invited her to marry him. Laura, bewildered but responsive, accepted him. For some little time past when she had thought of her future husband, she had hoped that it might be Rex. In a remote corner of a rambling London house where a dance was in progress, he had held the girl for one divine moment in his arms and kissed her. They loved each other. . . .

Recovering, he impressed upon her the absolute necessity of keeping the incident from Lady Rydal, at any rate for the present. Unless, of course, he added, Laura wished the matter to end there. Astonished to hear such worldly motives and opinions ascribed to her mother, she agreed rather reluctantly to his request. He was surely mistaken. Nevertheless, despite a faint scruple, she had kept silence.

Thus, he never knew how Lady Rydal got wind of the affair. It might be that she possessed something of that protective instinct which warns the mother bird of even a remote danger imperilling her young. In any case, she sent for Rex one day when Laura was motoring with Charmian in the country, and regretfully informed him there must be no recurrence of the sentimental episode. He mustn't, in fact, allude to the subject again for a whole year. Otherwise . . . she shrugged her shoulders, intimating by this gesture that stronger measures would

be adopted—he wouldn't be allowed to come to the house. It was a harsh decree and it gave him a clear insight into the quality of her worldliness. Laura wasn't to be allowed to make a hasty, improvident marriage with the first impecunious young man who approached her. She was capable of rash, foolish things. She wasn't like Charmian, to whom wealth and happiness were practically synonymous terms.

"But she loves me ——" he stammered, feeling as if the world had suddenly gone dark about him.

"At that age it means nothing. Laura must make a good marriage. Besides, she's very young—I don't want to lose her yet. I should like her to wait before coming to any decision."

But he wasn't, alas, in a position to reject her terms. His income was negligible; he had a good many debts and few prospects. He had foolishly imagined they would be able to live on Laura's income. People had told him that Lady Rydal was a very rich woman and that Laura was her favorite daughter. Thus, he had never anticipated any difficulties, and now his blindness seemed all of a piece with his folly. He had pictured a short engagement, a speedy marriage, a general settling-up with his numerous creditors. It was unfortunate that Lady Rydal should have been prematurely informed of the affair. He made the desired promise grudgingly and of necessity, feeling a little annoyed with Laura for what must have been at least a lack of prudence on her part.

II

Lady Rydal was waiting for her daughter in the drawing-room of her London house, a spacious apartment that ran from back to front and had a charming irregular shape. Situated in a quiet street in Westminster, it was

singularly undisturbed by the sound of traffic. Only as it were in the background, like a dim, sustained accompaniment, the ceaseless stir of the city made itself felt rather than heard.

It was a warm night in July. Many people had already fled from the torrid heat that had prevailed in London that year. Among those who remained, a certain restlessness was visible. Fatigue and strain showed even in the faces of the young.

The open window gave upon a small garden bordered by trees and shrubs and with a flagged path down the middle of it that divided the grass into two plots as with a palely shining riband. At the end of the path stood the gleaming statue of a young faun that seemed somewhat out of place in that urbane, sophisticated environment. A marauding cat slipped along the path like a shadow, stealthy, concentrated, suggesting a preoccupation with some deadly, inflexible purpose. A bird lifted itself from a shrub and flew away into the night with a shrill note of terror. It was as if it had become aware of the approach of a pursuing enemy. . . .

With Lady Rydal there was a young man with a clear-cut profile, sleek, carefully-brushed dark hair, and bold dark eyes. He too was waiting for Laura to appear, less patiently perhaps but with less anxiety than Lady Rydal so unconsciously but surely betrayed.

As he watched the manœuvres of the cat, the escape of the bird, he was somehow reminded of Laura and her mother. Such unperceived dramas were in progress perhaps all through the London world to-night. Pursuit, menace, escape, the cry of the quarry, the frustration of the hunter. Rex Forde gave a faint smile, and then turned his face towards Lady Rydal.

"Of course you won't forget your promise?" she said with an assumed carelessness. Her voice broke the ex-

quisite silence with what he felt to be a jarring note. He had no wish to be reminded of that rash promise, extorted from him under almost inhuman pressure.

Yet she was by no means a formidable looking person, this mother of Laura's. She was young-looking for her age, being as slim almost as a girl. Her abundant brown hair showed no sign of grey. She had been very pretty and was still extremely charming looking. Rex wondered a trifle irrelevantly why she had never married again. Why, she must have been a widow for quite fifteen years. Charmian and Laura were little girls when Sir Herbert Rydal died.

She wore black, relieved by some fine diamonds. Rex was uncomfortably aware of the atmosphere of luxury and prosperity that seemed to surround her. It reminded him that he was there on sufferance, and only on condition that he kept his promise. And of course he meant to keep it, the letter if not the spirit. He was wildly in love, and he was to see Laura again.

"Of course not," he answered easily, with his attractive smile. "Why do you remind me of it to-night?"

Looking at her, he wondered why he was admittedly so afraid of her. An agreeable woman of the world, still very good-looking and almost youthful with her clear, steady, searching blue eyes and the delicate complexion that owed little or nothing to artificial aids. That was the pleasing outward aspect of her. But of course it was on Laura's account that he feared her, somewhere in the region of his heart. She was the janitor at the gate, the custodian of the treasure, the dragon guarding the cave where the beautiful princess lay asleep and sheltered. This thought evoked another, although he would have had some difficulty in tracing the exact association of ideas. He observed easily:

"San Salvo is to be there to-night. You've heard of

course of that enormous fortune he's just inherited from his uncle, who was always considered a waster? I know him slightly. Would you like me to introduce him to Laura?"

Lady Rydal would have liked it very much indeed—there was always something romantic about these colossal, unexpected fortunes!—but, being both wise and wary, she did not disclose her hand.

His eyes narrowed a little as he watched her.

"We shall be charmed to meet him," she said. "Darell tells me he knows him quite well. He says he has taken it all wonderfully coolly."

"He'll have all those estates and castles in Italy plus the immense fortune this old San Salvo made in the Argentine," the young man observed with a touch of irrepressible bitterness. "He's one of the richest men in Italy, or will be when he gets back there."

"In spite of what La Rochefoucauld says to the contrary, one does like to hear of people having such a stroke of good luck," she remarked; "and, from all Darell says, he seems to be a most charming young man. I wonder we've never come across him. I know several of the Italian colony."

"He was only a clerk in a bank—that's probably why you never heard of him," said Rex, not without irony. "It's a pity he's leaving England almost at once—he might have picked up a wife here. His mother was English."

Although he would not admit it to himself, it was just because San Salvo was to leave the country so soon that he had offered to present him to the Rydals. It was hardly likely that he could become a serious rival in so short a time. And, despite his English mother—long ago dead—San Salvo was essentially Italian. He would probably marry one of the beautiful dark-eyed women of his own country.

"I remember her years ago," said Lady Rydal. "She spent a season or two in London after her marriage. That must have been in the middle 'nineties. She had one little boy then."

"Paolo. She called him Paul. He was her only child."

"He must be over thirty now."

"Yes, and he looks more. These foreign chaps often do."

"A Roman, I suppose?" She sighed, remembering the exacting demands of the Roman Church.

"Oh, yes, but I don't fancy, from what I hear, that he's much of a bigot. His mother was a convert—after her marriage. I've heard she wasn't happy, but she was devoted to her boy."

"I have always looked upon foreign marriages as a mistake," said Lady Rydal; "and, if you come to think of it, they often turn out very unsatisfactorily. We are far less adaptable than American women."

At that moment the door opened and Laura Rydal came into the room.

III

Rex had always realized that she was disquietingly beautiful, but to-night this quality in her seemed to be almost cruelly emphasized, so that he actually felt as if his eyes had been dazzled by her sudden approach.

And in that shimmering dress of white and silver, made very scantily, as was the mode of that not very remote day, she was in his eyes something more than beautiful. He compared her mentally to a wild white flower, not frail but supple, and able to face the wind and the rain and the open sky.

He sprang up and went eagerly towards her with outstretched hand.

She was fairer than her mother; her hair was of a pale but bright gold, and it grew close and thick about her low, square brow. The brows and eyes were dark, but the latter were not actually blue; they had deep shadows of violet and grey in them that made them soft and very beautiful. She was taller than her mother and fashioned on a slimmer scale. Her movements were free and very graceful.

"You look top-hole," he told her smiling.

"Oh, do you like my dress? I can't make up my mind about it."

"I can, though. It makes you look like a wood-nymph."

"You always say nice things to me," she said, laughing. She went quickly across the room to join her mother near the window. "I feel such a fright—they've waved my hair till I look like a gollywog." She put up a slim hand and patted her shingled head.

"No, it's quite perfect. I should hate you to have a sleek Eton crop."

Laura sat down near her mother, and Rex stood near, looking at them both.

"Darell's late," said Lady Rydal, "and Charmian of course is never punctual. She always says Hugo keeps her waiting, but I don't believe it."

"Charmian doesn't believe it either," murmured Laura softly.

Darell Hayne was a cousin, and on his mother's side he was also a cousin of Forde's. Thus he was the link between the two families, and was directly responsible for having introduced Rex to the Rydals. Darell had been wounded in the war, and had lost a leg.

He arrived ten minutes late, almost simultaneously with Hugo and Charmian Karslake. They were all three full of absurd improbable excuses to which Lady Rydal listened with a placid, indulgent smile.

Charmian was quite unlike Laura, being dark and vivacious. The four years that separated them in age had effectually prevented any intimacy between them. Their characters too were totally different. Charmian had been a stormy petrel in the house, defiant, even hostile, always passionate and vehement. Lady Rydal, who adored harmony, had refused to be upset by a mere child; thus she had seldom opposed her. She had allowed her to do pretty much as she liked and now was able to admire the results of her own wisdom. Charmian as a wife and mother was everything one could desire, despite her apparent failure in the rôles of daughter and sister.

She went up to Laura and kissed her perfunctorily.

"Well, my child, how are you feeling?"

"Top-hole." She quoted Rex, smiling.

"I want a cocktail, please," said Charmian, "and so does Hugo. He's been in the city all day and has had no tea."

Lady Rydal touched the enamelled bell-push at her side. Cocktails were brought and everyone accepted them except the hostess and her younger daughter.

Charmian put down her empty glass, observing:

"San Salvo is back in London."

A little pause followed the words. It was broken only by Lady Rydal, saying, "So I hear. Do you know him, Charmian?"

Charmian made a point of knowing everyone who moved, even if only temporarily, in the limelight. Celebrities intrigued her. It was therefore a little astonishing to hear her deny having met him.

"But he's sure to be there to-night," she added. "Lady Symes used to know his mother. Of course, like everyone else, she's trying to catch him for all her parties. But he hates dancing. Sometimes I think he hates women. But Darell knows him better than anyone, don't you, Darell?"

"And that is very little," said Darell cautiously.

"Good-looking chap," said Karslake, speaking for the first time, on an abrupt staccato note. "Not a bit like a dago. His English blood, I suppose."

"I'm quite curious to see him," said Laura, in her cool, indifferent way. "Do you really think he'll be there to-night?"

"I only know that Lady Symes is moving heaven and earth to get him," replied Karslake. "Of course I'm sure everyone's grossly exaggerating his fortune. Still, I imagine it must be something considerable, as Jane Austen would have said. And then all those castles at Otranto and elsewhere must make a special appeal to the feminine mind. It is so incurably romantic in its reactions."

"Otranto," repeated Laura dreamily. Romantic or not, the thought of a southern castle did make an immediate appeal to her imagination. She thought: "Perhaps one day I shall see it." Stranger things than that had happened. In youth everything seems perfectly possible except the commonplace.

"He is going to be there. He told me so," said Darell suddenly; "you must certainly meet him, Laura, if he is." He glanced at her approvingly. She was so very modern in appearance from the crown of her bright shingled hair to the tips of her little silver shoes: a child of the twentieth century, one whose eyes had been too young to realize the ghastly horrors it had offered.

Rex stirred uneasily in his seat. He could discern from her speech that Laura's interest in San Salvo was definitely aroused, and he began to regret his rash suggestion to effect an introduction. Still, even if he had refrained, there would have been Darell ready and eager to step in and supply the omission. What infinite harm might be wrought by a careless introduction! Two people caught up mercilessly into the web of fate, unable to extricate

themselves. . . . It was thus he seemed to see Laura and San Salvo.

The man had provided London with one of its periodical nine-days' wonders, and, elusive and even timid, he was trying to escape from the situation created by his sudden, unexpected accession to wealth.

Rex had never thought Laura worldly in her views; perhaps, indeed, he knew better than anyone how little materialistic she was in outlook. But he was aware that he wasn't only dealing with Laura, whose love he had gained without difficulty. There was her mother. She had won the first round, defeating him, so to speak, with a wave of the maternal wand. And the conflict was not yet over, and indeed would not be ended until the day when he should carry the girl away as his bride. He let his thoughts dwell upon that moment . . . the crowded church, the music, half gay, half solemn, the pale, white-clad bride with a wreath of orange blossoms forming a bandeau to her bright hair, the following retinue of pages and bridesmaids.

But now, when he glanced at Lady Rydal his heart sank, and the vision faded a little. Eleven months of that probationary year had still to run its dismal course, and who could tell what might happen in the interval? Even if he were still allowed to see Laura, their meetings were evidently going to be most strictly rationed. And to-night he felt as if a new and menacing shadow had been flung across his path. San Salvo had surely only to see Laura Rydal to fall in love with this fair and beautiful daughter of the North. Perhaps this very night he would dream of laying his vast, his fabulous, fortune at her feet! . . .

Sitting next to Charmian at dinner, he tried to listen attentively to her chatter, which generally amused him, but always his eyes wandered towards the white and silver figure opposite him. Laura was sitting between Darell and

Hugo; she seemed to be saying little but to be listening in a detached, smiling way to their utterances. She was beautiful, with the warm pallor of her face, the dark violet-grey eyes, the wonderful bright gold of her hair. . . .

IV

Afterwards Laura could remember little of what her brother-in-law and Darell had talked about during the first part of dinner. Her own thoughts were almost violently concentrated upon Rex; it was as if she were deliberately banishing the unknown San Salvo from the field of her vision. But she couldn't help mentally glancing at him, as it were, from time to time, for Hugo's words had stimulated her desire to see him, and everything just then was helping to envelop him in an atmosphere of fantastic glamour. Was it true, as Hugo had suggested, that she was romantic in her reactions? She looked from one familiar face to the other, not daring to let her eyes rest upon Rex for more than a second.

Once she thought: "I'm the one with a future—the one to whom things can still happen."

All these people—with the exception of herself and Rex—seemed so settled upon their appointed paths, so contented with their commonplace, unromantic lots! Charmian, for instance, so little older than herself, seemed a woman of vast experience. She and Hugo knew practically all that life would probably hold for them. Their principal interests were centred around domestic problems, chiefly financial: questions of money, of making a lucky scoop or of having it left to you . . . like San Salvo. More wealth meant to them the opportunity of purchasing a new Rolls-Royce or going for a prolonged trip abroad, and also provided an excuse for Charmian to buy quantities of expensive new clothes. Then there were the babies

—Charmian had had two in the three years of her married life: a girl first, then a precious boy. She adored them and was an excellent mother despite the fact that she was mundane to the tips of her fingers. But everything with her had to be perfect, even her children and their relation to herself. They were delicious little things, healthy, dainty, admirably behaved.

Charmian's life did not offer much scope for romantic speculation. She was extremely prosperous, quite satisfied with Hugo, who was an extraordinarily clever financier, and apparently perfectly happy. But Laura never envied her, less perhaps than ever to-night; she felt that she didn't in the least want that kind of life. Everything settled before you were twenty-five. You knew just what life would hold for you unless some terrific cataclysm supervened. More money, more cars, more jewels, more babies. And always Hugo there, complacent in his unchallenged prosperity, growing a little fatter every year. Charmian, too, contrived to keep slender only by means of a rigorous diet, reducing bath-salts, and constant massage.

Soup . . . Laura ate her soup, not caring yet to address Darell. Fish . . . she hated fish, the salt sea-y flavor of it. Then some ducks appeared, green peas and new potatoes. Asparagus. Ice-pudding. Darell's voice was smooth and agreeable; she listened to it without assimilating anything of his talk until he startled her by saying:

"You've eaten simply nothing. You must be in love. Do tell me all about it. I adore confidences, especially compromising ones."

"No one ever falls in love now," she answered in a spirited tone; "it's dreadfully Victorian even to talk of such a thing."

But she colored faintly, a detail which did not escape the astute and observant Darell.

"I'm immensely proud of being a Victorian," he told her. "I was born in the 'eighties. A splendid period."

He glanced at her. How pretty she was. The modern cynicism fell a trifle strangely from those perfect lips. Not that he believed her; this indifference was mere camouflage, for hadn't there been quite a good deal of talk of late about her and his young cousin, Rex Forde?

"But of course she's learnt all that from Charmian," he reflected, for he felt that Mrs. Karslake's influence must surely be deplorable, her outlook was so essentially prosaic and materialistic. There she was, dark, vivacious, brilliant, a noticeable figure that would thrust almost any woman into the shade. But not Laura. Laura possessed a luminous quality as of some palely-shining thing that would prevail obstinately despite the most determined attempts to suppress or extinguish it. He wished that he had been ten years younger, hadn't been, in fact quite such an old fogey of a Victorian. Really, to listen to these young people, one would suppose that anyone who hadn't been born in the present century was a hopeless back-number, fit only to be relegated to the most inaccessible shelf.

"Still, they couldn't have done without us in the war," he thought; "we weren't too old then, and most of us got wiped out."

Yet he was aware all the time that even youth wouldn't have served him now with Laura. She had always liked Rex, and now it was said that she loved him, wanted to marry him, only that Lady Rydal had put a spoke in her wheel. Rex, he suspected, was selfish, acquisitive, bent upon marrying money. But he was ambitious, too, and he wouldn't want to marry any woman without a penny, no matter how much he might love her. Still, Laura would be sufficiently well-dowered, although Darell had always thought it a great pity that Lady Rydal should have been permitted unlimited sway over her late husband's fortune.

Women never knew how to manage their business affairs. . . . He checked himself, for to deny them any quality was surely the outcome of Victorian prejudice.

He wondered what would happen in the future to those two attractive young people. Lady Rydal wouldn't be able to keep Rex permanently in what she had once artlessly informed Darell she deemed his "place." Probably he was even now writhing beneath that inhibition as a schoolboy beneath the lash. Very good for him, Darell decided. As long, of course, as it didn't hurt Laura. . . .

Oh, all that cynicism of hers meant nothing! It was merely an armor, a smoke-screen. She was playing the game of pretence like so many girls who are at once in love and uncertain.

During his silence Laura's eyes met Rex Forde's. She hadn't seen him lately; after that tempestuous moment in which he had confessed his love for her, he had seemed to withdraw into a rather remote background. He didn't come to the house any more. Perhaps he regretted it now, and hoped she would understand that he wasn't in a position to marry, a fact which Charmian had carelessly let drop quite recently.

Laura had never suspected her mother of playing any part in the matter. Even if she had known the whole story, it was unlikely that she would have rebelled, and it would certainly have saved her sundry stabs and thrusts of pain when she thought of Rex. Mere lack of money, she felt, could not in itself separate them; her mother had "heaps" and would surely give her some. But perhaps it wouldn't suffice for Rex, who had extravagant tastes; it might be, he had already privately decided that it wouldn't be enough. Her heart sank. Charmian always discussed possible marriages from the standpoint of financial feasibility; thus, it would have been impracticable for Laura to overlook this sordid question. Only if one loved

enough . . . she clung to that as to a spar amid wreckage. But perhaps Rex didn't love her enough. Just that once he told her that he loved her; she had felt the strange touch of his arms about her, the still stranger touch of his lips. From that moment she had had the sense of belonging wholly to him. She had imagined too that the little scene would repeat itself, and that perhaps when she could make up her mind to leave her mother, they would be married.

But there had been no repetition; she had never seen him alone since that day; she had sometimes even felt that he was purposely avoiding her so as to evade any recrudescence of that particular emotion. It had hurt her, and she had felt a little sharp sting of shame, remembering how easily she had surrendered to his embrace. Looking back, she could only think that his ardor had swept her off her feet; she had been wholly unprepared; he had taught her simultaneously that he loved her and that she loved him. Had it all meant nothing—nothing at all? Was it just a game? Looking at Rex now, with his air of cool, nonchalant composure, she could hardly believe in the reality of that fiery little episode.

V

"San Salvo isn't at all good-looking, although Joy Debenham does rave about him," Charmian announced in her clear, decisive tones. "Still he's a tall, fine-looking man with a stern face. I should think he might be a tyrant."

They were all in the drawing-room now, and Rex had found a chair close to Laura's, although he seemed disinclined to talk to her.

Laura started a little at this revival of the name around which a perfect network of legend had woven itself during

the last few weeks. She wondered why Rex stirred uneasily and restlessly, as if moved by some subconscious jealousy. It made her want to cry out: "Oh, my dear, you needn't be afraid! Of course I want to see him—everyone does—but that's no reason for you to be jealous." How amazed they would all be if, instead of repressing the impulse, she were to utter those very words! They would think her mad. But perhaps, if the truth were known, they were all repressing some insane utterance of the kind.

Rex hovered perpetually upon the beautiful borderland of her thoughts. He was always there, as if seeking for admission, sometimes humbly, sometimes with that proud gesture of possession as if to take her again in his arms; thus she could never banish him completely from that shadowy complicated region of her mind. Even if she diverted her thoughts momentarily from him, she was aware of a subtle disloyalty, a betrayal of their love because she had grown to doubt it.

Her desire to see San Salvo, as she might have wished to see any other wonderful new sight, faded a little. It was Rex she loved. She turned her face abruptly from him. He mustn't see her eyes just then; she had a dim idea they must be eloquent of love.

Darell, sitting on her other side, remarked: "They all seem to have gone mad about Paul."

"Paul?"

"San Salvo."

"Yes, but it is romantic, isn't it? To think, he's been five years in London and one hadn't even heard his name. They say he never went anywhere—he simply couldn't afford the clothes."

"I think both his riches and poverty have been exaggerated. Anyhow, he dislikes society, and he must hate all the fuss that's being made now."

"Are you trying to arouse my interest in him?" she

asked. But her eyes were defiant and seemed to say: "It's no use, you know. It's too late. There's Rex."

And his subconscious mind responded "D—n Rex!"

Aloud he only remarked: "Not in the least. Still, if you did meet, I think you'd get on—you'd probably like each other."

"Do you know him very well, Darell?"

"I doubt if anyone does that. But I've known him a good many years on and off. I knew his father too—Don Aldo, as he was called. Senior to me, of course. He married young and had this one child, and after his wife died he went out and joined his elder brother in the Argentine. People said it was because he didn't hit it off with his mother, who, however, took charge of the boy for him, and brought him up in Rome. We'd never heard his brother was making any money—he was always considered a rotter."

"And this present duke was always brought up by his grandmother?"

"Yes. She's still alive, not much over seventy. He lived with her in the old San Salvo palace till the war broke out."

"It sounds rather sad," she let drop reflectively.

"Yes, I don't think he can have been happy. She's a very good woman, pious and all that, but stern and strict."

Laura was beginning to feel a profound interest in the man who had endured that solitary childhood. Motherless, abandoned by his father. . . . If Darell had deliberately set about arousing her interest in him, he could hardly have devised a more efficacious method.

He had related the brief history with a certain aridity; nevertheless, he had contrived to draw a picture of San Salvo that differed essentially from any she had mentally formed. He was no longer the young man of fantastic wealth to obtain whose presence at their parties the London

hostesses were said to be falling over each other; he was a lonely bereft creature who had struggled single-handed against poverty. Incidentally she pitied him and wanted to see him. She said coolly:

"Why should enormous wealth make people interesting? It does, you know, and yet it's an odious idea."

"If he is there to-night, you must certainly know each other," said Darell. "I'm sure I shall find an opportunity of presenting him. But I must warn you that he doesn't care for girls."

"You think he'll dislike me?"

Darell regarded her for a second. He saw her white, perfect, modern, with a touch of melancholy that was alluring. It was due perhaps to her repressed and unacknowledged love for Rex.

"I'm quite sure he won't do that. On the contrary, I'm certain he'll admire you enormously."

She smiled. Darell was a dear, of course, but prone to exaggeration. He was given to flattery; it was cheap, easy, and made one popular. But one would be a fool to believe him.

"I shall be quite contented if this wonder is decently civil to me," she remarked gaily.

Well, there would be no danger in any case. San Salvo was on the point of departure; he was only waiting to settle up one or two purely business affairs which Darell was helping him to conclude. He was indeed in a hurry to get away from London, a place where he had never felt really happy or at home, although he had sometimes admitted it was profoundly interesting. He was going back to his own country, to the powerful old lady who still, so report said, reigned supreme in the palace, and of course he would revert to type as people always did when they found themselves in their proper hereditary environment.

Darell could picture him shedding the last vestiges of his

anglicization, the few remaining traces of his lovely English mother. He would go back to the old palace where he was born and which had been the scene of his lonely, rather sad, boyhood. And there would be the old Norman castle in the South—it wasn't Otranto, but that name served as well as any other—and the pink villa on the Tuscan hills, smothered in its groves of olive-trees. He would become important, dignified, absorbed, intent. Soon one would scarcely discern the formative influences of his early manhood, the signs of that epoch of stress and strain, of hard work and frugal living in an alien land. Darell wasn't sure if he would care to see him again when the change was effected. He had an idea he would prefer the old San Salvo he had known and really liked in London.

Rex had moved across the room to Charmian. Laura said in a low tone:

"Mother's made up her mind to spend the autumn and winter at La Cerva. We shall be gone six months at least. It's an awful prospect, isn't it?" Her face seemed to have acquired an added melancholy.

"But must you go? Couldn't you stay with Charmian?"

A variety of reasons must surely make the prospect of such a prolonged exile insupportable to her, Darell thought. Reasons not altogether unconnected with Rex and that abortive love-affair upon which Lady Rydal had quietly placed her heel.

Laura made a little expressive grimace.

"Don't do that," he interpolated; "it doesn't do to show people that you can look like a monkey."

She laughed. "Anyhow, I should choose the least of two evils by going with mother. Hugo hates having me there for any length of time."

"Very bad taste on his part."

"Oh, I don't believe any man really cares about his sisters-in-law. And then you forget my chief reason for

going abroad—I've got such a strong sense of duty." She looked adorably demure as she volunteered this information.

Instantly, however, her face froze again into that remote sadness, as if her heart were beating upon another and secret plane. She was thinking perhaps of Rex. They would be parted for some months. She would be there amid the palms and cypresses, the huge aloes and agaves, the prickly pears, the olive and orange orchards of Cerva, suffering from the exile's inappeasable nostalgia.

He could not resist saying: "Perhaps Rex will be able to take a few days' holiday." But when the words were uttered, he marvelled at his own temerity, and the little pause that ensued terrified him, because he believed she had taken offence.

She started, colored, bit her lip; there wasn't much to choose then between her and the Victorian maiden she so despised.

"Rex has nothing in the world to do with it!" she declared emphatically.

"I am old enough to be your uncle. You might with perfect propriety confide in me."

"There's absolutely nothing to confide. You're Rex's cousin—why don't you ask him? And please don't let mother hear you say such indiscreet things. She doesn't quite appreciate him."

"I have always admired her wisdom."

"Oh, you're against him too?"

"Not in the least. We're the best of friends. That's why I suggested he might run out to La Cerva and enliven your dullness."

"He won't get any encouragement to come."

"Many things may happen in six months." His voice sounded more kindly.

She turned to him swiftly with a wonderfully beautiful

and eager expression upon her face. Its calm was broken up. A chill apprehension came over him, as if he had unconsciously prophesied more accurately than he had ever imagined. He was often to think of those words of his during the six months that followed.

"You might suggest it to Rex," she whispered. "I can't, you know. I don't even know if he wants to come. I'm in the dark!"

He felt as if he were seeing her then for the first time. There was something both vivid and vital about her. The strange, wild, almost lost look in her large eyes thrilled him. To be loved by Laura Rydal, and not to respond? The thought was unthinkable. Not for one second should she have been left, as she expressed it, in the dark.

So she did care. That was the implication of her whole speech. And she was suffering. She wasn't sure of Rex Forde's love. All her airy cynicism was, as he had suspected, mere camouflage.

"Oh, I'll do my level best—you may be sure of that," he got out somehow.

Rex from across the room wondered how Laura could find so much to say to that dried-up old stick Darell Hayne. Their conversation seemed quite absorbing, as if it interested them both profoundly.

"Perhaps he'll tell me later if I can get him alone," he thought.

CHAPTER II

I

WHETHER by dint of sheer pertinacity or by reason of her still potent charms, Lady Symes succeeded in securing the presence of the Duke of San Salvo at her dance that night. He dined at her house first with a few carefully selected friends. People were eager to meet him, and were astonished at the ease and fluency of his English. Feminine comments upon him were universally favorable, while Catholic mothers especially deplored the untoward destiny that was removing him so soon from their midst. They even began to consider Rome as a place where the winter months might profitably be spent. . . .

He was still a young man though he looked older than his thirty odd years. He was tall, slender, lissom, with black hair, that was more than a little inclined to wave, brushed back from his forehead. His eyes were brown and so soft that they redeemed in great measure the rather harsh contours of his face. Women called him good-looking; men alleged that he was a dull dog; if jealous, they occasionally hurled the word "dago" at him behind his back, for no one would have cared to insult him to his face. His appearance suggested two qualities, pride and power, the former predominating.

His grave manner betrayed no elation at the immense stroke of luck that had just caused him to be the most envied man in London. He took it quite coolly, almost one would have said, indifferently, as if it were usual for

colossal fortunes to drop as it were from the skies upon his head.

Perhaps the fact of his nationality added a little to the romance of the situation. Yet, Italians were sufficiently plentiful in London—agreeable persons, for the most part, who did not conceal their enjoyment of the island luxury while openly lamenting the sickly sun that illuminated its wind-tormented landscape. But men like San Salvo, owners of a great name and position, were less frequently encountered in England, unless they were accredited to the diplomatic corps or had for financial reasons to adopt business careers. They preferred their own country, and there was little doubt that San Salvo would embrace the first opportunity of seeking his native shores to enjoy his new-gotten wealth in the sunshine of Italy. And then in all probability he would marry an Italian.

Lady Rydal went to the dance in her sumptuous car, accompanied by her two daughters and Hugo Karslake. Rex Forde and Darell Hayne followed in a taxi. The rooms were already fairly crowded when they arrived, and Darell looked about in vain for the tall figure of San Salvo. Perhaps, after all, he had cried off, for he was incorrigibly unsociable. Still, Hayne was conscious of an odd desire to present him to Laura Rydal; he thought it more than probable that the girl would attract him by reason of her unusual individual quality.

Laura was very silent this evening. Darell, who had probed her, had discovered something of the reason of her perturbation, and he couldn't help thinking it would have been more humane if Lady Rydal had been perfectly frank with her on the subject of Rex Forde. She couldn't then have given that tragic little cry, "I'm in the dark." She would have known where she was, and that Rex had been condemned against his will to this apparent neg-

ligence. Hayne was really sorry for the girl; he wanted to help her despite his strong private conviction that Rex "wasn't good enough for her."

Laura was of course dimly aware that something had interrupted the harmony that existed between herself and her mother, and to-night it seemed to her particularly apparent, so that she was inclined to ascribe its cause to the presence of Rex. She loved him secretly, and perhaps Lady Rydal had discovered something of her feeling for him, and, detecting for the first time a want of frankness in her daughter, had reacted unfavorably towards Rex, the prime instigator of this novel reticence.

Laura and her mother had never quarrelled, bickering was unknown between them, and scenes of any kind reduced the girl to a state of pitiable weakness. She had no fancy for riding the storm, and had often marvelled at Charmian's keen enjoyment of a tempest, and the relief she seemed to derive from it. Yet it was quite possible that, had Laura suspected anything of the actual conversation that had taken place between her mother and Rex, she might, in the first fervor of her love, have struck a feeble blow in her own defense.

She felt that something must have happened, though she was unaware of its precise nature. But apart from this there was the heart-breaking change in Rex himself. He seldom came to the house; no allusion was made when she did see him to that past episode; she scarcely ever had a moment's conversation alone with him. And to-night more than ever did his gay, indifferent manner perplex and grieve her. Perhaps, after all, he didn't care so very much. It had been a moment of madness, engulfing them both in its impetuous torrent, flinging down barriers, revealing that instinctive groping of two souls seeking contact in their recognized and irremediable isolation.

Laura had often lived that scene over again in imagination, recovering even something of its mingled happiness and terror. Rex, so changed, so eager, so loving; his hands like iron on her shoulders, his face pressed against hers, the world, all strange and transformed and beautiful, spinning about them. He was hers, hers, hers, at least so she had told herself. She envisaged a life in which the central, the predominant figure would always be the adored one of Rex.

Now, as she watched him dancing with the shortest frock in the room, she could hardly believe in the identity of the two figures. He looked so perfectly unconscious and unaware of her. She might have been a thousand miles away. Of course she had imagined that the moment they arrived he would seek her out and perhaps wish for no other partner the whole evening. There was pain in her eyes as she stood there by Darell's side. She had so counted upon dancing with him, talking to him. And surely he would say one word to show her that he hadn't regretted that little fiery moment of self-revelation.

She had a mad impulse to call him by name as he passed, to stop him, to make him come to her.

"Who's Rex dancing with?" She turned to Darell.

"Her name's Iris Chapman. Enormously rich—the father was a very adroit profiteer, and the girl was just young enough—or old enough—to reap all the advantages of it in the way of education."

Laura looked with interest, almost with dismay, at Miss Chapman. She was tall and as thin as a boy, and was very scantily attired. Her dark hair was cut close to her head, fitting it like a cap and disclosing her ears, from which hung long diamond earrings. Her black eyes were half closed. She seemed to sway to that lilting melancholy music, like a figure in a dream.

II

"Laura, I want to introduce the Duke of San Salvo. Miss Laura Rydal." Darell's smooth, agreeable voice cut across her thoughts, so passionately preoccupied with Rex. She looked up and met the grave, dark eyes, the hard, unsmiling mouth of San Salvo. His recent colossal stroke of fortune had done nothing to mitigate the inherent, persistent melancholy of his austere, rather harsh face.

"I don't dance," he said; "shall we sit out somewhere and talk? But if you wish to dance, please say so."

Darell, having effected the introduction, had forthwith vanished to the card-room. Laura was able to answer quite truthfully, "No, I don't in the least wish to dance."

If she couldn't dance with Rex, who had deliberately deserted her for the girl in the abbreviated skirt, she would rather leave the room and sit somewhere in the comforting dusk away from the sights and sounds that were now tormenting her. That savage music seemed to her wild and bitter, with its persistent, emphatic rhythm that beat like hammers upon her brain, as if it were determined by sheer brutal noise to drown the voice of grief. She saw grief to-night as an actual figure, shadowing menacingly the footsteps of love. . . .

San Salvo glanced at her as they moved side by side from the room. She was divinely fair, of course, very still and cold, almost inanimate. But her voice, when she did speak, thrilled him. It was soft but exceptionally clear, and had beautiful sounds in it. He was seized with a wish to hear it again, and almost immediately she said:

"Darell tells me you're going back to Italy very soon."

"Yes, I have to spend my life there now. I shall go as soon as I can get away, and I expect I shall find a great

deal to do. No one's looked after anything—except just in Rome—for years."

"I heard you've inherited all sorts of wonderful places."

"Yes. But I'm afraid some of them are rather tumble-down. I shall live chiefly in Rome with my grandmother."

"Yes?"

"You see, I was there as a boy. Then I was fighting for a couple of years—mostly on the Asiago plateau. Then I went for a bit to a bank in Turin before coming to London."

"But before that you were always with your grandmother?"

"Yes. I lost my mother when I was quite a little chap. She was English, you know. My father died rather later; he had gone abroad, though, leaving me in Rome."

"I was very glad to hear from Darell of your good fortune," she said simply.

He bowed slightly. "Thank you. It's a great responsibility, of course—one hopes one is going to be worthy and all that." He stopped abruptly, and his eyes shone with a curious light. The expression upon his face at that moment was enthusiastic, almost fanatical. He possessed both temperament and personality, and Laura actually felt for the moment that she was under a strange spell.

"We're going to Italy in the autumn," she remarked. "My mother isn't very strong and London doesn't suit her in the winter. She's found a place that she really likes, but unfortunately for me it's most dreadfully quiet and dull. Perhaps you know it—La Cerva—it's on the coast."

"Oh, I know Cerva. I've got some property close by in the mountains, and I remember spending a summer there with my mother when I was a very small boy. I don't envy you, though, if you care for gaiety. You

would have had more of this kind of thing"—he inclined his head in the direction of the distant music—"at San Remo or Bordighera."

"Mother prefers a quiet place; she says she sees far too many people in London."

But always secretly she had wondered whether her mother's decided preference for the soft airs and solitude of La Cerva could be entirely ascribed to reasons of health and a desire to rest and recuperate after her arduous London life. Hadn't the extreme cheapness of the place got something to do with it? Laura was utterly ignorant of Lady Rydal's financial position; she only knew that they lived in considerable luxury, there was no stint, and since her own emergence into society that year they had even been mildly extravagant. It was quite possible, therefore, that retrenchment might be necessary.

Charmian, who had married a very rich husband, was always complaining of being hard up, and the Karslakes lived in a far larger house and on a much bigger scale than did Lady Rydal and her daughter. Charmian's clothes alone must have cost a small fortune.

"We shall come back in the spring," Laura said.

"Six months of Cerva will kill you," he told her, smiling.

"Don't, please, put a curse on me, as the Irish say," she pleaded, laughing.

But all the time she was thinking desolately: "It'll mean six-months' separation from Rex." The thought hurt unbearably, the more so because of her new strong conviction that it would hardly make him suffer at all. He would seek consolation elsewhere, probably with Miss Chapman. He would be quite happy; after the first, he would hardly miss her. When she turned to San Salvo again, something of the light had gone out of her eyes;

she looked as she had done when he first saw her, coldly inanimate.

"I hate quiet, dull, cheap places, don't you?" she said.

"I really don't know. It depends what one's looking for. But I'm sure I should hate Cerva for any length of time. I shall have to go there myself sooner or later to see after my property. Perhaps next time we meet it may be there."

"Oh, that'll be delightful! We have taken a house called Villa Mimosa. You must look us up if you do come."

"With pleasure. I hope you'll like it better than you imagine. The climate's delightful and very mild in winter."

"Oh, I don't care about climate! At my age one doesn't think of that." There was an element of mutiny in her voice. Something, he felt, must lie behind this extreme reluctance to undergo that temporary exile.

"I'm really very sorry for you. I only wish Lady Rydal had decided upon Rome."

When he said this, his voice had a charming sympathetic quality, and his eyes softened. After all, she was a child, and a very pretty child, she had a right to the pleasures of youth.

"When I come to Cerva, we must have some expeditions in my car. I shall take you to the regions of shops and jazz bands!"

"Oh, that'll be frightfully kind! We shan't know a soul there, you see."

"You'll find a few English. But I wonder what on earth you'll do with yourself all day?"

"I shall go for long walks and play tennis and bridge, if I can find anyone to play with, and knit and sketch and read quantities of books," she told him. "And then I

shall drive with mother and call on the bores who dig us out."

She smiled as she drew this eventful picture. After all, she didn't in the least mind the dullness; to endure it cheerfully was all part of the day's work when one was trying to be a devoted daughter. But it was the separation from Rex that every moment became more formidable in anticipation. She felt that she couldn't bear it, and she had an odd, insensate longing to inform this stranger of the real tragedy that lay behind all her unwillingness to go abroad. His sympathy drew her out so that she was astonished at her own frankness. But she really couldn't tell him about Rex. There was something almost sacred about that love of hers for Rex. . . .

Secretly she wondered what there was in San Salvo to elicit even this much of frankness from her. She could never have disclosed her reluctance to that sojourn abroad to Rex, nor even to Charmian, who would certainly have told her she was making a fuss about nothing, and that most people would have been thankful to escape the London fogs at any price. Charmian was always admirably philosophic where other people were concerned; half the time she could never imagine what they were worrying their heads about. Unmarried girls too had such an easy time—they didn't seem to realize their luck!

"I ought not to grumble," she said suddenly. "I'm sure I shall be perfectly happy. Mother and I are devoted to each other—we never really want anyone else. And then there'll be the sunshine—I love sunshine—and the flowers. I'm sure it'll be charming. I'm not a discontented person, really."

"Oh, but I think you've every right to grumble. You see, it isn't as if I didn't know Cerva. I can't imagine what made your mother choose it when she has a young daughter like yourself."

"Oh, it was recommended to her by a queer old Englishwoman who'd lived there with her dogs for twenty years. Still, I'm hoping that six months of it will work its own cure. You'll have to look us up to see how we're surviving it."

III

Before he had time to answer, she saw Rex Forde advancing towards them. There was a scowl on his dark face and his lips were set in a hard, sulky line. He bestowed a curt bow upon San Salvo, and as they stood there side by side Laura was able, for the first time in her life, to compare them. San Salvo had the advantage of height; his distinguished air, his fine-drawn face with its angular sternness, its touch of pride, set him apart and perhaps above other men. At any rate, he lost nothing by the contrast; indeed, to her dismay she discovered that it was Rex who lost, became too highly-polished, too immaculately attired, too sleek, too conventional in his undoubted good looks. Laura felt angry with herself for the temporary disloyalty of her thoughts. Rex was a king among men. No one, least of all San Salvo, could dethrone him from that high place he held in her heart.

The two exchanged glances. San Salvo, who knew little or nothing of London gossip, had never heard their names coupled; thus, he was slightly astonished at the look of undisguised hostility Rex now bestowed upon him. He interpreted it accurately as the outcome of jealousy. He was in love perhaps with this pretty, adorable child. It was impossible to suppose she could have gone even this little way upon her life's journey without encountering love. Why, it must have been waiting for her upon the very threshold! . . .

"Aren't you going to dance, Laura?"

"Yes." She rose then and held out her hand to San Salvo, who raised it to his lips, inclining his head in courteous foreign fashion.

He stood there watching them as they moved away. And he wondered if Rex Forde, of whom he had heard something from Darell Hayne, had any right to be jealous, to carry Laura Rydal off like that to dance with him. Earlier in the evening she had said that she didn't want to dance, and during their long conversation in a remote, dusky corner beneath some branching palm-trees she had never betrayed the slightest restlessness or evinced any wish to go away.

San Salvo felt now that there were a thousand things he would have liked to say to her if there hadn't been this tiresome, unforeseen interruption, which had produced also a sense of awkward embarrassment. Never mind. If he really decided that he wished to see her again, it would be perfectly easy to seek her out at La Cerva, where, possibly, in her enforced solitude she might be delighted to renew the acquaintance. He even took a little notebook from his pocket and wrote on a blank page: *Miss Laura Rydal, Villa Mimosa, La Cerva.* Not that he was likely to forget it; still, memory did play strange tricks, especially when one was in the midst of a violent upheaval that shook the very foundations of one's life.

"She's certainly very pretty," he thought, as they vanished. "I wonder if she means to marry that insolent young man." He had observed not altogether without amusement the flash of open hostility in Rex's dark eyes. "He could never make her happy, though. Hayne says he's selfish and extravagant and as idle as he dares to be." He sighed. Laura was a flower, meant for delicate handling. "I shall certainly go to La Cerva. I must see her again. She's sure to hate the place, but at any rate we shall be safe there from embarrassing interruptions."

He slipped down the stairs and departed. It was a very warm night. July was nearing its close; the stars were extraordinarily bright. As he stepped out into the street the stir, the characteristic odor of London greeted him. Well, it had been his home for five years, and it was strange that only just at the end of his term of exile romance should have touched him. He had gone to so few houses and had made scarcely any friends; the people he knew were chiefly those who were connected with his mother's family. But when his eyes had first rested upon Laura Rydal something within his breast had stirred involuntarily. She was so different. He felt that if he could ever have loved any woman it would have been this one. But he was going away. In all probability they would never see each other again, unless he followed up his present mad mood by seeking her out at La Cerva. And if he did so, he knew that it would be because fate had proved too strong for him, because he could see Laura beckoning to him from afar, because, in short, life without her was inconceivable. . . .

As for his accession to fortune, he was hardly even now able to realize it; he still had the sense of being a figure in a fantastic dream. All that wealth and property waiting for him. Italy calling her exiled son back to her across the dividing seas, luring him with her promise of sunshine, her flowers, her easy unstrenuous life. Yet he dreaded the inevitable return, the taking up of old threads that had become thin from disuse. He had acquired so many English ways and sentiments and ideas, partly hereditary but partly the result of environment, and he knew they would not find favor with his grandmother.

It would be impossible to go back to the old harsh tutelage, and yet that was precisely what she would expect of him. Still, she would be thankful he wasn't returning with an English Protestant wife. Often in her letters

she had warned him of the danger of marrying a woman of another country and another religion, "one unaccustomed to our ways and ideas and mode of life." She was Xenophobe—the old lady—to the tips of her tapered fingers. A tyrant of the old school. She had dominated his lonely boyhood, spent after his mother's death and his father's departure under the ægis of tutors and priests. But always she had been there, formidable, alert, controlling and directing everything like an absolute monarch. Nothing had ever been accomplished or arranged without her direction, supervision and consent. She was ageless, and to him she had seemed made of iron; never in his life could he remember her as either ill or ailing. She was up at six o'clock every morning and, after attending Mass at a neighboring church, returned to set her house in order for the day. And she ruled that household as a man might have ruled it, with a punctual discipline that never relaxed. He could remember being afraid of her, of her discerning eye, her sharp tongue. She had been a heartrending substitute for the beautiful mother he had so adored and whom he had for so long secretly mourned. His mother had had eyes with just that soft look Laura Rydal's possessed. English eyes were often like that; they looked at you gently as if they were indeed the mirror of a rare spirit, a beautiful kindly soul. . . .

As he walked briskly along he thought: "My grandmother will look upon me as completely lost!"

Nor would it be without cause, since he had gradually given up the practice of his religion, less from malice than from negligence. It wasn't always easy in England to find the time or opportunity to go to Mass unless one purposely remained in London on Sundays. And he had fallen into the week-end habit; the lure of country places, very green and peaceful, had exercised a magical influence over him, chained as he was to a desk in a great

banking house during the week. Nor had he during his sojourn in England come into contact with many of the English Catholic families. But now, thinking of Italy and its manifold claims upon him, a kind of spiritual nostalgia seized him. Some of his wealth would go automatically to the upkeep of churches and convents situated on his various properties, so that it would be impossible for him to stand quite outside, a mere onlooker.

And to-night he knew that he wished to sense those old influences once more. It was essential for a man in his position to set an example in that new Italy, springing up alive and regenerate from the ashes of war. No renaissance was possible unless religion played its due part in it; you could not build upon a merely materialistic foundation. San Salvo was glad to think now that his indifference and negligence had never degenerated into active antagonism. And now with his eyes turned towards Italy, with his mind full of those new ineluctable responsibilities, he could not but envisage his own probable reactions when brought once more into close contact with the things of the soul.

In that new life of his there would be place only for a Catholic wife, preferably one of his own country. His grandmother would certainly take the first opportunity of parading suitable and selected candidates before his eyes; there was something faintly Circassian in the idea which amused him. Hitherto he had had no wish to marry, nor had he been in a position to support a wife and family. But that old boundless freedom from responsibility had vanished together with the epoch of poverty and hard work. He was going on a voyage of discovery, if not to a new world at least to one that would present itself under an unfamiliar aspect, and he wondered what awaited him there.

The vision of a pale northern face illuminated the dusk

dimly. It was flower-like, elusive, and remote, yet somehow luminous and beckoning. The white and gold of it, the large eyes full of light, the suggestion of invincible unconquered strength combined with something of physical fragility, caught and held his imagination. It was strange and a little sad that he should have encountered her almost on the very eve of his departure, and just on the threshold of those great changes. Perhaps next time he saw her it would be beside the beautiful little bay of La Cerva, with Monte Celio thrusting its great shape into the sea, and the island lying beyond floating as it were upon the breast of the waters. Yes, he could picture her there in those white sunny, dusty ways where the aloes were like the huge tough swords of giants, and the terraces were garmented with the shining grey and silver of innumerable olive-trees.

Another figure stepped phantom-like between them. Rex Forde, dark, scornful, insolent, possessive. San Salvo was almost certain that Rex was in love with Laura Rydal. Perhaps Darell Hayne would tell him how matters stood between them.

IV

Rex said sulkily: "Why did you let him do that?"

"Do what?"

"Kiss your hand." His voice was full of suppressed anger.

She counter-questioned: "Would you have had me snatch it away? Besides, they all do it abroad. It means nothing."

"They don't do it to girls. Beastly cheek I call it. I hate these foreigners. The more they try to look like Englishmen, the more foreign they are."

He was violently jealous and resentful. At that mo-

ment he could have flung his promise to Lady Rydal to the winds, reckless of consequences. It was the "damnable eligibility," as he would have termed it, of San Salvo that had aroused his smouldering jealousy. Lady Rydal would certainly have smiled upon such a suitor for her younger daughter.

Laura laughed a little, although she was nervous of Rex in this angry mood.

"Oh, my dear, don't give it another thought," she said; "it isn't worth it. Besides, I think he's charming. And he talks of looking us up at Cerva." Rex swallowed this unwelcome intelligence in silence. "He's so frightfully sorry for me having to go there."

"I congratulate you on your conquest. You must have been sitting there for hours with him. And he hates women—especially young ones."

"Oh, Rex, don't be so horrid. I don't really expect for a moment I shall ever see him again."

"Why weren't you dancing?"

"He doesn't dance. Isn't it a pity? I suppose he never had time to learn."

"He'd much better not try. He'd make an awful ass of himself if he tried to."

Somehow this undisguised jealousy comforted her. It was really what she herself had felt in a more moderate degree earlier in the evening when she had moodily watched Rex dancing with Iris Chapman. So he did care. He wasn't really indifferent. And he looked so handsome when he was sulky, like a great spoilt schoolboy. She wanted to console him, to assure him that San Salvo was really nothing to her.

They danced. Their combined movements were perfect.

Presently he said: "Have you forgotten that night at the Pictons'?"

"Of course I haven't. But don't let's talk about that now."

"Why shouldn't we?"

"Because we were both very silly."

"Were we?"

"Yes, foolish and a little wicked. I hated not being able to tell mother."

He admired in her that sensitive, uneasy conscience; it was just what a man would desire in a wife. But it could cut both ways.

"That didn't prevent her from finding out, though," he remarked.

They had stopped and were surveying the other dancers. Laura's eyes were full of alarm.

"But she doesn't know anything."

"Oh, yes, she does. If you didn't tell her, someone else did. Didn't you wonder why I'd never been near you lately?"

"I did—a little."

"Perhaps you thought I was cooling off?" he asked savagely.

"If you want to know, I did. I thought you'd regretted it, just as one regrets a foolish thing one has said on the impulse of the moment."

"But that wasn't said on the impulse of the moment. I'd been waiting my opportunity to tell you."

"Oh, don't please say all this to me now," she pleaded.

They danced again. So he had meant it—every word of it. And he hadn't regretted it. He hadn't felt the sting of shame, the prick of an uneasy conscience. He had spoken to her deliberately of his love. But how could it be true that her mother knew all about that episode?

"Did mother say anything to you?"

"She did."

"But when?"

"You'd gone off motoring somewhere with Charmian."

Her heart sank. And yet somehow she experienced a certain sick relief.

"She didn't approve?"

"I *don't* think! I'm bound over for a year. On parole." He looked down at her perfect little face. "That'll give San Salvo a long innings."

"Oh, Rex, don't."

"What did he talk about?"

"Oh, he told me a little of what he meant to do when he goes back to Italy. He'll live with his grandmother at their palace in Rome where he was brought up. Somehow I think he'll hate that part of it. Darell says he wasn't happy as a boy."

"I expect he'll soon marry and get shut of his grandmother. I wonder why they're so patriarchal in Italy? Our grandmothers are generally pensioned off and sent to live in a dower house if there happens to be such a thing."

"Perhaps they don't have them in Italy. Anyhow I don't believe he could get rid of her if he tried. I think she must be rather a formidable person, from what Darell says."

"Well, I don't envy him except for his money. When am I going to see you again?"

"We're off on Monday to Scotland and then we shall leave for Cerva in September. Mother's let the house for six months from then. I don't suppose we shall be back before April or May."

"And I'm not to see you till April or May?"

"I'm sure you can if you want to."

"What do you mean?"

"You might come to La Cerva, mightn't you?"

"I don't think!"

"But Rex, if you can get leave, what is there to prevent you?"

"Your mother, for one thing. San Salvo, for another. I'd better leave the coast clear for him."

Laura's face froze a little.

"Those aren't excuses at all," she said witheringly; "if you wanted to see me, you'd come in spite of mother and San Salvo." There was scorn in her eyes.

His love seemed to her then a superficial thing, just scourged into renewed life by a temporary fit of jealousy. He didn't care, deep down. She was tormented by the thought of his fundamental indifference, by the fact that he could permit any obstacle to stand in the way of their meeting. Her own love, she felt, was strong enough to demolish all barriers.

When he spoke like that, she felt cold and apprehensive, as if she had given her love too easily. His first word had called it forth, and then he seemed indifferent to it.

"If I go against your mother, I shall never be allowed to see you at all," he answered sullenly.

"But you mustn't have doubts of me," she told him, almost with passion. "If you don't believe I love you, I don't want to see you ever, Rex."

This mollified him. Without a word from him, she had reminded him of her love of which once before she had made confession.

"But I do believe it, Laura. Only things are fighting against us—can't you see that? I'm in a hopeless position."

His anger had died down, but his face was still sullen and morose. She felt instinctively that he was still assailed with jealous doubts of her love. He couldn't forget San Salvo, who had singled her out for such particular attention. As far as Rex was concerned, the evening had been a complete failure. It was only when she thought of San Salvo that she derived some solace from its memories. And even then the thought brought with it a little

sensation of disloyalty towards Rex, because, on looking back, she discovered she had really regarded his sudden appearance as an intrusion. It had never before occurred to her that he could ever at any moment prove unwelcome, and secretly she knew that there had been some justification for his outburst of jealous anger. For the first time she had seen him in a light that wasn't completely favorable, and the thought wounded her. She had been so happy sitting there, talking to San Salvo, discussing her own future plans with him, and she realized she had seldom felt so perfectly at ease with such a complete stranger before. She had liked him, and during the time they had spent together she had forgotten the little wound Rex had inflicted upon her earlier in the evening. The man had held her attention; he was at once more English and more foreign than she had expected to find him. That quality of strangeness in one who spoke her own language with such perfect facility emphasized something in him that seemed almost exotically foreign. She had an idea—of course a mistaken one—that in Italy he would lose that veneer of what she dubbed Englishness, becoming perhaps simplified in the process. She was conscious of a wish to see him in Italy among Italians.

But the practical outcome of the evening's events was that she no longer felt so passionately averse to the thought of that six months' exile at La Cerva. She was nearly certain that he meant to seek her out.

CHAPTER III

I

"I HEAR," said Lady Rydal, as they drove home together that night, "that Darell introduced San Salvo to you."

"Yes."

"Was he agreeable?"

"Very. He doesn't dance, so we sat out and had a long talk."

"Is he really leaving England at once?"

"In a few days."

Laura repressed an impulse to tell her mother of the possibility of his visiting them at La Cerva. She remembered that Lady Rydal was sometimes inclined to attach too much importance to such trifles.

"Did you like him?"

"Very much. He seemed unusual. And he's sympathetic and intelligent."

She sank back into the corner of the car, feeling fatigued and somehow a little disappointed. The evening hadn't brought her the kind of pleasure she had expected, but she was aware that it had not been, on the other hand, quite a failure. She had learnt a little, not a great deal, concerning her own position with regard to Rex, and it was a relief to feel that his absence hadn't been voluntary; it had been imposed upon him by her mother. In the circumstances this was a solace, and the knowledge might have made her happier if it hadn't been for something perplexingly perverse in Rex himself. To feel even a momentary anger towards him was to her insupportable, and

yesterday she would have also declared it to be impossible. He might conceivably wound her, but he could surely never arouse within her even a passing indignation. Yet he had succeeded in doing both; she felt as if she had been forced to regard him from a new angle, and the vision had proved a little crooked and distorted. Perhaps, indeed, she would never again be able to see the Rex who had seemed to her so completely perfect. Tears gushed to her eyes. She longed to confide in her mother, but alas, in the matter of Rex they had never been in sympathy, and it would only provide Lady Rydal with an opportunity for some very plain speaking on the subject.

All the time she had the feeling that San Salvo, powerful, dominating, was pushing Rex out of her thoughts, as if he had no right to be there. She resented the knowledge, but undoubtedly the honors of the evening rested with San Salvo.

A little fear came into her heart. Instinctively she stretched out her hand and sought her mother's. For the remainder of the way Lady Rydal held her daughter's hand in a strong comforting clasp. She asked no questions; she was too clever a woman for that. She knew that Laura had sought the physical contact in order to gain consolation and support.

II

San Salvo called on the following afternoon, and Lady Rydal, who had secretly hoped for some development of the kind, was at home and received him. Darell Hayne, who had known him for some years, formed a pleasant mutual link between them; thus she could not feel that they were quite strangers to each other.

Gratified by his visit, which he could quite easily have foregone at such a strenuous moment of his life, she could not help watching its effect upon Laura. The girl was

very quiet and cold at first, then gradually she reacted to his presence, they talked and laughed as if they had been old friends. He spoke of his journey and alluded to a possible meeting at La Cerva. Lady Rydal listened complacently. She was aware that his interest in her daughter was definitely aroused, and she was mildly encouraging about his "looking them up at Cerva." Her indifferent eagerness suggested permission and acquiescence without enthusiasm. Young men very often displayed this initial interest in Laura, although none of them had as yet been of supreme importance. Dazzled by the remembered accounts of his almost fantastic wealth—so unusual in an Italian of good family—she now permitted her thoughts to dwell agreeably upon Laura as the future Duchess of San Salvo. She had never supposed that Laura would make a conventional marriage, such as her sister had made. She was fashioned on totally different lines, and would demand something at once more thrilling and more romantic. Not that San Salvo was in the very least the type of fairy prince. He was too harsh and swarthy for that, but he had fine eyes and a very agreeable voice and manner combined with an unmistakable air of being a personage. Lady Rydal's thoughts reverted suddenly to Rex. That childish affair must really come to an end, and the sooner the better. Last night Rex had looked like a man hopelessly and desperately in love, while Laura had appeared pale, composed, but with a miserable expression in her eyes that told Lady Rydal she was suffering. While she could not believe that Rex had ventured to break his promise, he must at least have shown Laura that for him the existing position spelt torture. And while she felt deeply annoyed with him, Lady Rydal couldn't altogether blame him. It might be that her conditions were too hard. In any case Laura was involved in his suffering, if only because she believed herself to be the innocent cause of it.

Lady Rydal, watching the animated faces of Laura and San Salvo, comforted herself with the reflection that Rex couldn't possibly make the journey to La Cerva. For six whole months and possibly for longer, Laura would be immune from that influence. And, like Darell, Lady Rydal believed that much might happen in six months. Especially now that San Salvo would in all probability prove an integral part of the landscape. The complete separation would surely do much to diminish the ardor of Rex, and for Laura there would be San Salvo . . . unless, indeed, in the complicated intricacies of his new life he was destined to forget all about her.

"We shall look forward to seeing you at La Cerva," she told him as he rose to go. "It's a deadly hole, and I'm afraid Laura will find it horribly dull. So you see how more than welcome you will be."

Her voice had something of the cold, unenthusiastic quality of Laura's, but it lacked too its beautiful sounds. It was harder, more incisive, more like Charmian's.

"Thank you. I shall look forward so much to seeing you both there."

He looked admiringly at Lady Rydal. It was astonishing how persistently youthful these Englishwomen managed to keep. Despite her forty-five years Lady Rydal did look quite definitely young; she was scarcely less slender than her daughter; her brown hair, still thick and abundant, was untouched with grey; her blue eyes were clear and sparkling. He wondered idly why she had never married again. Darell had told him that she had been left a widow in her early thirties with these two little girls.

Glancing from mother to daughter, he was able to discern indications of a finer temperamental quality in Laura than in Lady Rydal. For Laura was a child of the new world, born in the prosperous decade that preceded the cataclysm of the Great War. She was the heritor of the

new ways, the greater liberty, the more boundless horizons. His eyes met hers rather wistfully. With her by his side he felt that he could have entered upon his new sphere and kingdom with a finer courage, a more profound faith, an almost passionate enthusiasm. Had they met too late, just when those new responsibilities were so imperatively claiming him? Soon whole worlds would divide them. Men should marry in their own country. He had often witnessed the disaster of international marriages. They demanded an adjustment that added infinitely to the normal complications and difficulties that beset all unions. He sighed as he bent over Lady Rydal's hand and kissed it.

III

"A very pleasant young man," pronounced Lady Rydal. "I wonder if he means what he says about coming to La Cerva."

"It'll be a godsend if he does look us up," said Laura indifferently.

She leaned her chin on her hand.

"He may find us both dead from boredom." Lady Rydal's tone was ironically humorous. She sometimes wished she had the courage to disclose to Laura the real motive for their proposed sojourn abroad. But she belonged to a generation that kept its own counsel; that drew, in fact, a dark veil of secrecy over its disabilities and diseases, its financial difficulties and private happenings.

Looking at Laura now, she remarked:

"A little rest will be very good for you. You are too pale. I almost thought last night that a touch of color ——"

"I hate rouge. It makes me look vulgar. I'd rather be pale."

"Charmian manages it very cleverly. I'm sure no one would suspect!"

Laura smiled. "She wouldn't mind if they did. She says she doesn't feel dressed without it."

"When you are older, perhaps," murmured her mother.

This discussion was interrupted by the advent of Lady Rydal's two sisters. The younger, Sophia Marley, was a widow without children; the elder, Patience Percival, who was unmarried, lived with her in a small joint *ménage*.

Laura, having greeted them, withdrew, for she had an engagement. She left the three sisters together, feeling tolerably certain that she and possibly San Salvo and incidentally Rex would prove the subject of their immediate conversation.

She was right, for the door had hardly closed upon her when Lady Rydal remarked:

"We have just had a visit from the Duke of San Salvo. Laura met him last night at the Symes's. You know, he has just inherited that colossal fortune his uncle made in the Argentine."

"We have heard of nothing else for days," said Mrs. Marley acidly.

"He really seems to admire Laura. He talked of looking us up at La Cerva."

"Really? How very fortunate for her." Mrs. Marley's interest was faintly aroused. Phyllis Rydal had such extraordinary luck with her girls. And yet they were nothing at all out of the way. "But not anything serious, of course?" she added, deciding upon reflection that matters had not had time to progress very far.

She had never admired Laura, considering her too pale and anæmic looking; she could never imagine why people made such a fuss about her. She had so little to say, really one might almost call her dull. . . .

"Time will prove," said Lady Rydal oracularly.

From habit she was much more frank with her sisters than with her daughters. She did not learn much from them, but they learned a good deal from her, and, being the rich prosperous one of the family, they liked to be *au fait* with all her minor happenings.

"You don't mean that Laura likes him?" said Sophia. "Has she got over that silly fancy she had for Rex Forde?"

"I never ask her things like that. It's much better to leave her alone."

"You always had the wisdom of the serpent, Phyllis," said Mrs. Marley admiringly.

"Opposition never achieved anything. And dear Laura has her father's obstinacy, although she doesn't show it in quite the same way."

"Tell us about San Salvo. Is he good-looking?" asked Patience.

"Yes, in a harsh sort of way. But he has beautiful eyes. I thought his hair a little too long. It waves too ——"

"Perhaps he's had it permanently waved. I'm told many men do," observed Mrs. Marley, who was a repository for queer items of information.

"Oh, I should hardly think that!"

"I suppose he's a Roman Catholic?" inquired Patience.

"Yes. Darell told me he was. Most Italians are."

"Then I hope you won't let Laura marry him. If she does, he's sure to try to convert her." Mrs. Marley's voice had a sound of quite genuine alarm.

Lady Rydal laughed.

"I don't think we need bother our heads about that contingency," she said good-humoredly. She and her sisters were all "High" Church, and lately Patience had begun to call herself an Anglo-Catholic.

"Of course the Pope is the Patriarch of the West. But as he doesn't recognize our orders, we are not bound to

obey him or submit to his authority," said Mrs. Marley trenchantly.

"If Laura did marry this man, it might be her duty to submit to the Roman branch," said Patience, who in her youth had had "leanings" which had been severely crushed.

Lady Rydal stirred uneasily, dismayed at the trend of the discussion. She said quietly, "I don't think I should like Laura to become a Roman Catholic. We have always been so united—it might make a difference ——"

"Perhaps he isn't very strict. So many of these modern young Italians don't practise their religion," said Mrs. Marley hopefully, "and in that case he wouldn't interfere with her. He might even have the ceremony in one of our churches."

They reflected in silence upon the possibility of Laura's escape from the Roman peril.

But Patience was unconvinced.

"An Italian in Italy is a very different person from an Italian in England," she pronounced. "Especially when he's in a big position like your San Salvo. Environment counts for so much. And in Italy you simply can't forget the Catholic religion—it's in the air. You're surrounded with it. Shrines at the street corners and in the country lanes. Lamps burning in all sorts of unexpected places before a picture of the Madonna. You'll find one on the walls of nearly all the big palaces in Rome." Her speech showed that she wasn't hopeful about the suggested indifference of San Salvo.

"Well, he's only seen dear Laura twice, so I really don't think there can be anything in it. I dare say if there had been a little more time—but he's leaving England next week. Of course she looked extraordinarily well last night. That white and silver dress Fanchette made for her is extremely becoming. Even Charmian said so, and you know she doesn't admire that pale type."

"She would look all the better for being a little paler herself," snapped Sophia Marley, who of late had not been on very good terms with her elder niece, who had, she considered, neglected her. "She's ruining her complexion with all that rouge and stuff. I can't think what these young married women are coming to. And the girls are nearly as bad. What would our husbands have said if they had seen us dressed like that?" she continued almost fiercely and turning to Lady Rydal. "Last time I saw Charmian she had her skirts above her knees."

"That is entirely the fault of her dressmaker," replied Lady Rydal with some spirit; "they refuse to make a dress now except in the very latest fashion. I dare say we shall soon be trailing our skirts in the mud again as we used to, and then what an outcry there'll be from all the votaries of hygiene!"

She did not in the least resent the criticism for, after all, Charmian had passed completely out of her own control. And if Karslake preferred her to look as she did, and indeed as everyone else looked just then, it was no affair of hers.

"When shall you go to La Cerva?"

"Directly we come back from Scotland—about the end of September. It'll still be summer in Italy."

"And you really think this man intends to follow up the acquaintance?"

"I know nothing except that he talked of coming to see us."

Mrs. Marley shrugged her thin shoulders. She felt that she had said all she could in decency adduce against the project, and if Lady Rydal had posessed an ounce of principle she would surely have changed the venue of her sojourn abroad. She would have given La Cerva a wide berth. She wouldn't have run any risks, despite the lure of worldly wealth and temporal possessions. Then the

other side of the picture rose up before her eyes. Laura as a Roman princess . . . occupying a great position. She wondered if she would ever be invited to stay with her. The girl was an aloof, chilly little being. Of course that early affair with Rex might safeguard her from making a purely mercenary marriage; one never knew, though, quite how far it had gone, nor even whether Rex had any serious "intentions." It seemed of late to have come to an abrupt, rather mystifying termination. Phyllis had never, however, cared to discuss it with her customary frankness. . . .

"Of course Rex won't join you?" she inquired. Like all slightly malicious persons she was intensely curious.

"Oh, dear, no, nothing of that sort!" replied Lady Rydal briskly. She thought idly: "What extraordinary ideas Sophia has."

"Won't Laura mind?"

"Mind?"

"The long separation."

"I don't suppose she'll give it two thoughts," said Lady Rydal.

But there, alas, she was completely in the dark. She had Rex's own assurance that Laura reciprocated his love, although she characteristically refused to face the fact. It was a girlish fancy, immature, fugitive, and destined to perish when starved by a little disciplinary separation such as she herself proposed to inflict upon them. Nevertheless her sister's suggestion that Laura might "mind" was singularly unwelcome just then, when she believed that she had arranged everything for the best.

Laura would surely outlive her romantic tendencies; she would see that a marriage to be really successful and prosperous couldn't be based solely upon love. Other ingredients were required to "stiffen" it.

"I thought there was some sort of understanding," said Patience.

"Understandings," said Lady Rydal, "cannot exist on three hundred a year and debts. Laura isn't a fool."

"No—she'll want five thousand a year. They all do now," sighed Mrs. Marley, who regarded the young generation as completely mercenary, selfish, greedy and immoral. But it was thus too that she had regarded the frantic pioneers who had pursued liberty and freedom and emancipation in her own youth.

"San Salvo must have much more than that," said Patience, a trifle enviously. She could remember not being allowed to marry a man because he was considered too poor and not good enough, and often now she wished she had had the courage to take her life into her own hands and marry him in defiance of the cold wisdom and prudence of her elders.

IV

The two sisters left the house together and walked along the street on the shady side, for the sun was still very hot. Some trees in a square through which they passed on their homeward way were very still and motionless, so that the leaves outlined darkly against the sky, seemed to be carved out of some hard green metal.

Mrs. Marley was the first to break silence.

"You may depend," she said, "that Phyllis intends to marry Laura to that young Italian. I could see it in her eye. She is very worldly, and then you know she has never been quite sound on the subject of Rome."

Patience acquiesced feebly. She was the more yielding of the two and was generally ready to submit to Sophia's guidance. She was indolent and found it less trouble. Secretly she preferred her more opulent and successful sister, and would have liked to be better friends with

Laura had she dared, but fate had thrown in her lot with that of Mrs. Marley, and she had not rebelled. Besides, Sophia was such a capable manager, and looked after the house and servants with a practised efficiency. . . . If Patience had a weak spot for anyone in the world it was for Laura Rydal. She admired her more than she ever ventured to tell Sophia, who disliked both her nieces and was never tired of prophesying their eventual downfall.

"I wonder if he has ever seen Charmian," pursued Mrs. Marley. "I should have thought that one sight of her silly little painted face would be enough to put any nice-minded man against the family!"

"Not if he were really in love," said Miss Percival timidly. "And Laura and Charmian are such complete contrasts, aren't they? One so worldly and the other so—so *spirituelle.*"

Their conversation continued on these lines; Mrs. Marley, dogmatic, assertive, and disapproving; Miss Percival, meek and deprecating and disagreeing only in the mildest manner when Laura was attacked. From living together the two sisters had fallen into the habit of discussing things until the very pattern of events became threadbare and worn, resembling at last a half-erased sketch. And as nothing of much importance happened in their own lives, which were devoted almost exclusively to a little parish work and a good deal of bridge and mah jongg, their attention was naturally directed towards Phyllis and her two daughters. Phyllis, they were agreed, had always had the lion's share of good things from her nursery days onwards. She was the youngest daughter; she was the best-looking of the three; she had married well and had children; she had heaps of money and a beautiful house and quantities of friends. Sir Herbert had been a devoted husband and had left a world which he had always adored, with an extreme reluctance. Yes, one might say that

Phyllis had had everything and, what was more, she had made up her mind that neither of her children should fare less well.

Mrs. Marley's marriage, on the other hand, had been what Lady Rydal secretly called "a poor business." George Marley had possessed neither money, brains, nor health. However, he had had the good taste not to linger when disease smote him, and he had left his widow neither much better nor much worse off than she had been as a girl. Since they had joined forces, she and Patience had managed quite comfortably. They secretly envied Phyllis her life of ease and luxury, her immunity from petty economies. They thought she might have been more generous about lending them her car or giving them "lifts," but perhaps it didn't occur to her. Rich people never seemed to realize how tiring it was to go about in tubes and buses and scramble for a seat during the crowded hours.

They waited for their bus at Victoria, and this evening it seemed more than usually difficult to obtain places in one. Both Mrs. Marley and Miss Percival were too well-bred to push, and they disliked the risk of being flung off the footboard into the dust by some less scrupulous and more hefty female hand.

"I don't know how it is," said Patience at last, "but there really seem to be more people in the world now than there used to be. I wonder where they all come from."

"Statistics have proved that the whole population of the world could be accommodated in the county of Rutland," said Mrs. Marley, who was an encyclopædia of curious and recondite scraps of information.

"I'm sure it would be very unpleasant for Rutland if they were," murmured Miss Percival absently.

She was thinking of Laura—Laura who haunted her thoughts on this warm and delicious summer's evening. She wanted to go to her and say: "My dear, you stick to

Rex. Don't listen to anyone. It doesn't matter about his being poor if you really love him."

But it would, she knew, be perfectly useless. What chance would Laura have if her mother really made up her mind that she should marry San Salvo?

She climbed up into an almost empty bus after her sister, and they plunged homewards in silence enforced by the clamor of the traffic.

"Patience is looking a little sickly," thought Mrs. Marley. "I shall have to take her away to the sea. One of those cheap French places."

She began to weave plans for an economical holiday that would not encroach too strenuously upon their modest resources.

"I shall want a new hat," was her next thought, "unless Phyllis gives me that blue one she's been wearing for this past month. It doesn't really suit her. That grey georgette dress of hers would do very well for Patience, and Phyllis can't possibly wear it in Scotland."

All the way home her thoughts were agreeably occupied in the disposition of her sister's wardrobe.

V

At dinner that night Lady Rydal said to her daughter: "My dear, your aunts seemed excessively intrigued about San Salvo!"

"Did they?"

"Yes, I couldn't resist telling them he'd been here to call —that he'd suggested coming to La Cerva."

Laura laughed. She had just been writing a long letter to Rex, and San Salvo had become a remote figure somewhere in the background of her mind. He didn't really count, though always she had the uncomfortable feeling

that in the future if he so chose he might count for a good deal.

"I am sure they must be already picturing me as the future Duchess of San Salvo," she said lightly. But she narrowly watched the effect of these words upon her mother.

"Sophia seemed terribly afraid that you might become a Roman Catholic," said Lady Rydal. "And I think it extremely unlikely that San Salvo in his position would marry a Protestant."

"Or an Englishwoman," said Laura quickly.

"His mother was English."

"Yes."

"And Darell told me she was converted after her marriage."

Laura was silent. When dinner was over she followed her mother upstairs to the drawing-room and glanced at one of the evening papers that was lying on a table. Suddenly she gave a little exclamation of surprise.

"What is it?" asked Lady Rydal.

Laura read aloud the following paragraph:

"The Duke of San Salvo is leaving London for Rome tomorrow morning."

"I thought he didn't mean to go for another week," said Lady Rydal in a disappointed tone. She had hoped at least to persuade him to come to a very quiet family dinner party. "This looks like—flight."

She stared hopelesly at Laura, whose fair face betrayed no emotion at all.

"His grandmother must have sent for him," she said quietly.

She laid the newspaper down upon the table as if it contained no further interest for her.

CHAPTER IV

I

IT WAS not so many years since La Cerva had been a picturesque village, possessing unrivalled views of mountains and sea, a sturdy old castle close to the shore, some beautiful villas of ancient date, and a small harbor to shelter its fleet of fishing craft. But owing to the passionate pursuit of sunshine away from their own island, consistently displayed by the British people, combined with the comparative immunity from income tax possible to those permanently resident abroad, the place had of recent years developed into a mushroom town of innumerable small houses with plaster walls and red roofs.

It was, however, a dull paradise where dull people played bridge and tennis, danced, bathed when climatic conditions permitted, and gossiped continually about each other. Golf was not a feasible pastime upon those steep and precipitous slopes, where only pine-trees, olives, cypresses, and armies of sworded aloes could obtain a precarious footing, or no doubt some adventurous spirit would have laid out a suitable course.

To endure the lack of certain amenities, the pale-faced exiles had to concentrate their thoughts rather determinedly upon the advantages to be derived from the high exchange, the avoidance of considerable income tax, and the prevalence even in winter of soft airs and delicious sunshine. In time it was hoped that La Cerva might rival San Remo, Bordighera, Alassio, and Rapallo in its social attractions, but so far it was still necessary for its

foreign visitors to seek the luxuries and amusements of life in those more sophisticated resorts.

Lady Rydal carried out her plans in that meticulous manner characteristic of her. Nothing but death or disaster could have conceivably constrained her to alter the hour and date of her departure, and September had hardly reached its golden close in Italy when she arrived at La Cerva with her daughter. She immediately settled down there to a life of extreme indolence. No effort could be demanded of her, for there was no one to demand such a thing, except perhaps Laura, who never "bothered."

Summer still reigned there, and in any case it was a lotus-eating land for those who preferred indolence to activity. Laura, unversed in symptoms and accustomed to her mother's lethargy, never paused to inquire if there could be any definite reason for it. She blamed herself afterwards, but her very ignorance seemed to condone the offence. She could blame herself for little else in regard to her mother; the rôle of dutiful daughter was most lovingly fulfilled. If it hadn't been for the perpetual thought of Rex, she would have found almost perfect happiness in that sun-smitten solitude.

All through the autumn she wondered from time to time whether San Salvo ever intended to come. She often thought of him, of that strange attraction he had had for her despite her preoccupation with Rex Forde—an attraction she was inclined to attribute to the romance of his history and the intriguing fact of his wonderful possessions. He had perhaps aroused within her that craving for romance which lies latent in the heart of every imaginative woman.

The villa rented by Lady Rydal stood upon a precipitous hill-side, the gardens flowing down in terraces to the white winding road below, and climbing steeply to a

point that looked dizzily down upon its flat and rambling red roofs. From its terraces and windows one commanded superb views of the sea and mountains stretching from the great point of Monte Celio on the one side to the charming island of Cervalina, lying as if afloat on the breast of the water, upon the other. Between the two, on the narrow flat strip of coast, a ragged line of houses showed distractingly irregular profiles against the challenging blueness of the sea. This formed the ancient village, and behind it were the broad boulevards, the white villas, the ambitious avenues of palms proper to a Riviera resort. Behind these again were scattered the smaller villas, some scarcely larger than bungalows, with walls of pink or yellow plaster and glaring red roofs. These domiciles were almost entirely inhabited by English people. Many of them were Anglo-Indians who, having spent thirty odd years in the service of the Empire, had looked forward to settling in England when retirement released them. And to these perhaps La Cerva, with its economic possibilities, its fresh and glancing prettiness, its divine blueness of sea and sky, its mild climate, delicious sunshine and luxuriant flowers, offered but a poor substitute for their own beloved and fog-bound island from which they had been driven by the harsh exigencies of income-tax. Many of these pale Northern faces to be seen in La Cerva betrayed a permanent nostalgia and discontent. They formed a little community of exiles united in their disappointment with life in general rather than by any fraternity of interests or tastes. They were envious too of the rich idle ones who descended upon La Cerva in the winter, possessing the sumptuous villas, the "show" gardens that had been in existence when the place was still a quiet fishing village.

On Sundays they all foregathered, as in duty bound, in the little English church, which was closed during the

summer while the chaplain took his annual holiday. Sometimes the building was scarcely capable of containing that colony of enthusiastic Anglicans. But very few of the exiles ever gave a thought to the Catholic religion or evinced the slightest desire to attend Mass in the beautiful old fifteenth-century cathedral that stood aloof in its big sunny piazza.

Sir Gaspard Bligh, a permanent resident who had lived for many years in a beautiful old villa situated on a steep hill a mile or two from the town, was said to be an ardent Catholic, but he knew none of the British colony at La Cerva, and was considered snobbish because he never mixed with them. There were queer stories about him—no one quite knew why he had thus expatriated himself. Something about a cheque, a slight but penal irregularity, some intrepid person had once suggested, but a lawyer's letter from London threatening proceedings for libel effectually silenced that adventurous tongue.

Lady Rydal was perfectly contented with her choice. She liked the villa she had rented, she was enchanted with its garden and beautiful views, the climate suited her to perfection and she declared she hadn't felt so well for years. She did so hope that darling Laura wouldn't find it too dull. Wouldn't she care to know some of the people down there? She inclined her graceful head towards the little town with its ragged row of houses, its trim, modern bungalows, and the avenues of palm-trees shining in the sun. But Laura shook her head. She was quite happy. She wasn't at all dull.

And then she would go out on the terrace and gaze at the hill-sides covered with a cloud of olive-trees that looked as if they had been flung promiscuously down upon these steep slopes to take their chance of acquiring a safe foothold. Enormous aloes emerged from the interstices of the stone walls—they had leaves like broad grey

swords, incredibly tough, and looked as if they had been fashioned by some giant hand. Groups of cypresses and pines stood out here and there, dark and threatening, amid the silver greyness of the olives and aloes.

And beyond was the background of blue sea curving against the paler blue of the sky, with Cervalina floating upon its breast like a purple flower.

It was thus in great solitude and often in sadness that Laura Rydal unconsciously awaited her destiny. Rex, in his busy preoccupied London life, seemed almost to have forgotten her.

II

October and November passed uneventfully. December brought the first sharp touch of winter to Italy. Then the weather became what Italian winter weather always is—warm with sirocco one day, bitterly cold with icy tramontana the next, characterized by occasional flurries of snow, frequent deluges of rain, riots of brilliant sunshine, and a few terrifying thunderstorms.

In its sheltered bay La Cerva was more protected than most places from the harsher caprices of weather. There were few days when the sun didn't shine for some hours upon the sea and convert the houses of pink and yellow plaster to golden palaces.

Lady Rydal abjured society in La Cerva. The only person with whom she was acquainted was the somewhat mysterious Sir Gaspard Bligh, who seldom allowed a Sunday to pass without motoring down to visit his old friend. He liked the look of the girl too. She was wonderfully pretty with all that bright hair, those dark eyes of violet grey. Sometimes he would send the car to fetch them to come to luncheon with him. He loved to display his beautiful garden even in winter.

He lived quite alone in the big rambling villa with only an army of servants, a few dogs, and a parrot to keep him company. He was a great reader and possessed a fine library from which Laura was urged to borrow all the books she wanted. Truth to tell, he felt a little sorry for her having to spend the winter in such a quiet place. All very well for an old fogey like himself and even for Phyllis Rydal, but Laura was a young thing. . . .

One day when they were lunching with him, he turned to her suddenly and said:

"I shall have a friend staying with me next month. He's just come into an unexpected fortune, and he wants to visit his property in the neighborhood. His name's San Salvo."

"Oh, we met him in London just before we left," said Lady Rydal. "A charming young man. He came to see us. He said he might be coming here. My cousin Darell Hayne knew him very well."

Bligh gave her a quick, scrutinizing look. Was this perhaps the reason of her long sojourn at La Cerva? But he dismissed the thought. If she had had any hopes that he might take a fancy to Laura, she would probably have spent the winter in Rome.

"Have you heard from him lately?" Laura asked. "How does he like living in Rome?"

"He seems quite happy. His grandmother—you may have heard him speak of her—is rather a trying old lady. I think he's glad to get away sometimes."

Laura felt again that faint sense of excitement she had experienced at Lady Symes's ball. So he meant to come. He would stay here, in this beautiful house with all its treasures of pictures, tapestry and china. Perhaps in a few weeks she would see him again.

"You must be sure and bring him over to see us," said Lady Rydal.

During the months that had elapsed since they left England, Rex had made no move. Laura sometimes received a letter from him, but there was no regular correspondence. She had lost all hope of his seeking her at La Cerva. Sometimes his letters had been sent from the Chapmans' huge neo-Georgian house in Oxfordshire. He never mentioned Iris, yet somehow the thought of her tormented Laura. Perhaps their friendship was daily growing in intimacy, while her own image became a little less distinct and beloved. More and more had she learned to believe that her mother's principal motive in coming to La Cerva was to separate her from Rex.

After luncheon Lady Rydal preferred to sit and rest in the loggia, enjoying the beautiful view over the bay. The fine, bold promontory of Monte Celio dipped its great purple arm into a sea that was calm and divinely blue. Although it was now December, the garden was full of flowers, and the soft, brackish airs seemed to hold but little hint of winter.

Sir Gaspard invited Laura to go and see the garden with him. As they were walking up a steep path to the upper terrace he said suddenly:

"I may as well tell you that you have made an enormous impression on Paul. I believe his chief reason for coming here is that he may see you again."

His kind, wise, piercing eyes sought her face. It was very calm and pale and immovable, and yet he could not but feel that his words had aroused within her some faint emotion.

"I should like to say something—perhaps a great many things—in his favor. I've known him since he was a boy, though I've hardly seen him for the last five years. But I know something of his courage, his endurance, his fundamental goodness. I know it will sound horribly banal to your young modern ears, but he really is of the

salt of the earth. That's why I want to give you a word of counsel. No—I shan't apologize, my dear. I'm an old man, and you're a very young girl. But if ever San Salvo asks you to be his wife, think twice—think a great many times—before you send him away for any reason in the world."

Laura stopped. The path was steep. She was feeling a little breathless, as if that rarefied, heady air had filled her lungs too full.

"But if I were to love someone else?" she said.

He shook his head, which, with its thick shock of perfectly white hair, possessed a slightly leonine appearance.

"Even that wouldn't be a sufficient excuse. There couldn't be another man in the world so well worthy of your love."

She walked on, a little ahead of him. Suddenly she turned and said:

"Did mother ask you to say anything of this sort to me?"

He gazed at her in astonishment. "I have never even discussed you with your mother. But I could read between the lines of Paul's letter, and I felt that he was very keen on seeing you again. I just wanted to put in a good word for him."

"I've only seen him twice. I liked him very much—he was charming to me. But I felt that he might be very hard."

"Most of us can be that," he observed dryly.

They had reached the upper terrace and were sitting upon a rustic seat placed so that an uninterrupted view of mountains and sea lay outspread before them. The irregular, huddled houses of La Cerva made a dark, jagged profile against the sea. The sun was shining on the groves of palms and the little bungalows that dotted the stretch of flat land behind the old town. The slim

tower of the cathedral rose gracefully above the houses, colored in palest gold.

"You see," she said in rather a choked tone, "I care very much for someone else. My mother hasn't said anything to me, but I know she doesn't approve of it—he has no money and they say he is in debt and very extravagant. It's because of him that I'd rather San Salvo didn't come. I thought perhaps you could tell him it would be kinder to stay away?"

She was consciously trying to raise a barrier between herself and Paul. She feared even while she longed to see him again. It was for his own sake, she told herself passionately, that he mustn't come to La Cerva. Especially if he intended to do so with this incredible purpose of asking her to be his wife.

"I shall not tell him anything of the kind! Let him take his chance. And you—don't you refuse to listen to him. If he pleads his cause don't try to check him. I don't know anything about this man you imagine you care for, but do let me entreat you not to throw away the substance for the shadow."

Laura was silent. She was thinking then only of San Salvo. Of his eyes so wonderfully soft, set in that harsh, austere face. Of his thin, muscular, powerful hands. She was thinking too of what he had told her of his lonely boyhood. He seemed never, since his mother's death, to have had any love in his life. And now perhaps he wanted hers, that, alas, was given so completely, so permanently to Rex Forde.

"Is this man likely to come out here?" Sir Gaspard asked. He did not even know his name, but he felt an illogical animosity towards him, principally because he was rendering it impossible for Laura to respond to San Salvo.

"Oh, no. I don't think mother would care for him to

come even if he wanted to." Her voice held an apathetic note.

"So you're not sure even of that?"

"No. Not even of that. I suppose every woman is more or less in the dark at some time or other."

"But—you oughtn't to be in the dark! Not for one moment!" he assured her emphatically.

He was determined, so it seemed to her, to rush her defences. In pleading the cause of San Salvo, he was wilfully tearing down the barriers she had raised, as if with a desire to display them for the worthless, flimsy things they were. He wanted her to see that the shadow was one that merited no pursuing. As she listened to him, she felt that he was a prophet, possessing some mystical insight into the future as it concerned herself and San Salvo.

"You see, my mother tried to put an end to it all. I've discovered that, and it hurt, but it didn't hurt so much as the other thing."

"What other thing?"

"The feeling that he was perhaps keeping away from our house of his own accord, and because he didn't really want to come. I thought he might regret having said that he cared. . . . . "

She was gazing straight in front of her now. Monte Celio was growing a little grey as the afternoon light faded. A chill wind wandered across the heights. Sir Gaspard rose.

"It's getting cold. We must go in. But, believe me, I am very sorry for you. The uncertainty—your mother's disapproval—even the doubt of this man's affection. You haven't been able to hide that from me. More than ever do I beg you if San Salvo should come to give him a fair hearing."

"And I still hope to convince you that it would be fairest

of all not to let him come here with any such hope. Not," she paused, "that I'm conceited enough to believe in his caring so very much for me. Why, we hardly know each other . . . and then I'm not a Catholic."

Sir Gaspard was silent. There, as he knew, lay the only real barrier. San Salvo's wife, to be the perfect companion and helpmeet, should have possessed also that great gift of the faith. But Laura was very young. To-day she had an aspect of almost extreme youth. He didn't want her to make a mistake on the very threshold of her life. It should have held great treasures for her, and in all the world upon the human plane he could conceive of nothing that should bring her a greater and more satisfying happiness than the love of San Salvo.

They did not speak again on their way back to the house, where they found Lady Rydal already displaying symptoms of impatience at being left alone so long. What could that old man have found to say at such length to darling Laura? She hoped the girl hadn't been bored. Had she known the gist of their conversation she would most certainly have been a little astonished and perhaps a little dismayed.

III

Not long after this episode Lady Rydal was laid up with an attack of bronchitis which was sufficiently serious to keep her in bed. Laura helped the maid to nurse her; it gave her an occupation on those wet winter days when the clouds drooped over the mountains, submerging their shapes in a sea of white mist.

She read aloud to her mother, wrote her letters for her, and was always at hand if required. It never entered her head to be anxious about Lady Rydal's condition. She

very seldom got through the winter without an indisposition of some kind.

"You'd better tell Sophy and Patience that I'm really not up to writing letters," her mother told her.

The sisters were very active correspondents, and their letters consisted largely in running comments on Lady Rydal's latest communication to them. Mrs. Marley in particular, praised, rebuked, disapproved, and advised with ceaseless energy.

Laura wrote a short, guarded letter; she was afraid of alarming them about her mother's illness, and therefore made as light of it as she could. But it was quite sufficient to arouse Sophia's suspicions, and her answer came as rapidly as it was possible for an answer to do.

> "Patience and I hope that you are telling us the truth about your dear mother's condition. Daughters are often apt to disregard their parents' ailments, and you have so little experience of illness. We know too how difficult it is to obtain really good medical advice in those small, unfashionable places off the beaten track. If dear Phyllis gets at all worse I do hope you will move her to San Remo or Mentone, where she could have proper attention in a nursing-home. I was always against her taking that villa so far from the town, knowing how destitute Italy is of all modern comforts and conveniences.
>
> "Remember, my dear, that Patience and I are ready to start off *at any minute* to come to your assistance. You are far too young to bear the responsibility of it all alone. We telephoned to Charmian to-day to ask if she had made any plans for starting, and she actually laughed! She said she hadn't the smallest intention of going to La Cerva—she had far too much to do in London. We could not help think-

ing it just a little heartless, although of course dear Charmian has her husband and children to consider. But you know if *we* were wanted we should not permit any engagements here to stand in our way. We should consider it our duty to start at once."

"Don't let them come, my dear," Lady Rydal gasped amid a paroxysm of coughing induced by a burst of irrepressible laughter. "Sophia would be sure to think she knew better than the doctor."

Laura bent down and kissed her.

"Of course I won't let them come, darling. If you're not better soon, I shall get a nurse. She'd be much more use than the aunts."

Nevertheless Sophia's letter left its sting. Never after was Laura able to regard her mother without a strange terror of apprehension born of that apparently groundless anxiety displayed by her aunts. And as if to confirm this presentiment of evil, she was obliged to acknowledge that she had never seen her quite so ill and breathless before. For the first time she began to feel desperately alone and unhappy and ill-at-ease at La Cerva.

The weather was almost continuously wet. Sea and mountains were blotted out by that drenching rain. All day she could hear the steady drip-drip from the overhanging eaves. The garden had a neglected, sodden look. Laura began to feel almost ill from the want of exercise, of fresh air, of companionship.

Even to her inexperienced eyes it was abundantly plain that Lady Rydal wasn't making the slightest progress towards recovery. In all her life Laura had never passed such a melancholy Christmas and New Year. The only person she ever saw besides the doctor was Sir Gaspard. He motored down occasionally to ask for news and generally stayed to tea. But he refrained from mentioning

San Salvo, and sometimes Laura began to believe that he must have thought it wiser to tell him that his proposed journey to La Cerva could only end in disappointment, and that was why he had decided to postpone it.

Already February was near at hand, and there had been no sign of San Salvo. Laura didn't try to disguise from herself that she would often have welcomed a visit from him during those wet, lonely winter days. Perhaps, after all, she had been too frank in her confession to Sir Gaspard. A woman might be very glad to see a man without having the slightest wish to marry him. Even if it were selfish on her part, she would have liked to talk to San Salvo again; she had an idea too that he would have cheered and comforted her.

IV

An enervating sirocco blew from the south. There was something sickly and feverish even about the sunshine, as if it were destitute of the health-giving properties usually attributed to it. The atmosphere was heavy, with promise of thunder.

In the garden the mimosa-trees were a glory of gold; their gay tassels filled the air with a powerful fragrance. An avenue of camellias displayed deep rose-colored and pure white blooms, amid a profusion of glossy polished leaves. Decorative and of almost conventional design, they seemed like flowers very delicately and accurately fashioned of wax by some master-hand.

Laura was sitting in the loggia, suffering from a queer depression and nostalgia she had not been able to shake off. For days she had seen no one except her mother and Warner, and it was therefore with a pleasant sense of surprise that she heard footsteps approaching on the path that led up steeply from the road below. Now she

could see a man's form emerging from the shadows flung by the ilex- and cypress-trees. For one wild moment she almost persuaded herself that it was Rex, of whom she had heard very little since leaving England, although she was painfully aware that he had never at any time been remote from her thoughts. She had needed him so much that it had produced within her an agony of nostalgia. His coming would have lightened her load; he would have represented at least something familiar and dear to whom she could reveal the anxiety that was devouring her.

As the figure emerged from the tangle of bushes and shrubs that bordered the path, she saw that the man was too tall for Rex.

"Where have I seen him? I'm sure I know him," she thought confusedly. "Of course it's San Salvo. So he has come. I never thought he meant to. Perhaps he's come in spite of everything."

A fit of unusual shyness seized her, for normally she had plenty of social courage, although she could never equal Charmian in this respect. Charmian was composed no matter how delicate and difficult the situation. She was never "rattled." Her coolness almost amounted to insolence.

If only he had told her that he intended to come to-day! If only Sir Gaspard had warned her that he was in the neighborhood and likely to descend upon her! She assured herself that she disliked surprises—that even if the man had really proved to be Rex, she would still have felt something of this vague, timid annoyance, this sense of being taken at a disadvantage, almost as if she had fallen into an ambush. After a moment's hesitation she rose and went to the top of the short flight of marble steps that led from the garden to the loggia.

San Salvo looked up at her and smiled, and in his smile there was something of eager friendliness that relieved

the situation of all embarrassment. They shook hands and exchanged greetings. Then she became aware that he was less composed and assured than usual. He took a chair opposite to her but seemed to have nothing to say. His large brown eyes shone strangely as if with some secret joy that his reserved demeanor was trying to conceal.

"How is your mother?" he asked suddenly.

So he knew of Lady Rydal's illness, and perhaps had only come to inquire for news of her. It set his visit on a more normal level.

"I don't think she's much better," answered Laura.

"I was very sorry to hear she was ill. It must be especially trying for you, so far from home and from your relations."

"Yes. I've felt rather lonely," she acquiesced.

She pushed a box of cigarettes towards him, but he shook his head.

"No, I won't smoke, thanks. Are you sure it isn't too cold for you out here?"

"No, I like it. I get so little fresh air. I'm up in my mother's room a great deal."

"You don't look very brilliant. Perhaps you ought to have a nurse?"

"I've thought of that, but she doesn't like the idea. She coughs dreadfully, and her heart's weak. It's been going on now for more than a month. Are you staying with Sir Gaspard?"

"Yes. He's kindly put me up for a few days. I'm glad to be back in Cerva."

She sat there in silence. Instead of being an intrusion, she was beginning to find his presence comforting.

"Tell me more," he said at last.

"Oh, there's so little to tell. She was perfectly well when we first came. The place suited her wonderfully.

Then I think she must have caught cold—she began to cough."

"You ought to have someone to help you. You look so tired."

There was an urgency in his tone now which she could not mistake. It seemed to indicate that it mattered very much to him whether she looked tired or not. She had been alone in her anxiety so long that the knowledge comforted her. Ah, but it ought to have been Rex sitting there, Rex caring about her welfare, Rex speaking words of sympathy. Rex who all these months had given no sign of any special solicitude for her. . . .

San Salvo was struck to-day by her beauty, even more perhaps than on the occasion of their first meeting in London. That exquisite pallor of hers, a warm whiteness like that of a magnolia-bloom; the soft violet-grey eyes with little dark rings around them; the mouth with its droop at the corners; the clearly-traced line of the dark eyebrows. Just a hint of weariness that gave her a new significance. He seemed to be looking at her under an entirely new aspect. In her blue, knitted dress with its little coat, and her fair hair uncovered, she seemed to him adorable.

"I suppose if it goes on, I shall have to get a nurse," she said, "but at present I can manage all right with the help of the maid. My mother's a very good patient. But she won't let her sisters come or Charmian." She presented him with these items of information in a voice studiously ironed of all emotion.

"Am I keeping you from her? Perhaps I ought to go away?" He made a movement as if to rise, but her little swift gesture checked him.

"No—do stay to tea. It'll be ready in a few minutes. And it's such a pleasure to see you. I've been hoping you would come. I have so few visitors."

"That is very kind of you," said San Salvo. "I should have come long ago if it had been possible. But my grandmother found so much for me to do in Rome."

"And the castle in the South?" she asked. To her imagination that had always seemed the most romantic of his many possessions—even now she could hear Hugo's dry staccato voice alluding to it ironically as the Castle of Otranto.

"Oh, I haven't seen that yet. I shall go in the spring or early summer."

She let her eyes wander past him at the flowering garden, the yellow showers of mimosa, the camellia hedges, the bright oranges, that looked like globes of imprisoned sunshine. Mingling with the pervasive scent of mimosa and orange blossom was the salt tang of the sea and that suggestion of wood-smoke which, fragrant and aromatic, always seems to form the basis of all odors in Italy.

"You must tell me if I can be of any use. I'm staying with Bligh for a week. My car's at your disposal. And I can fetch anything you want from San Remo."

"Thank you very much. But so far we've been able to get everything. I won't forget your kind offer, though."

He made the thought of Rex seem more definite and in a sense much more poignant. She still felt it should have been Rex sitting there, Rex not talking as did San Salvo of her present anxiety punctuated with offers of kindly help, but pouring forth the tale of his woes, his debts and difficulties, his own reactions to the stupidity and malevolence of the world in general, his annoyance at finding her chained thus to her mother's room. His was always the narrow, personal, injured view.

Laura pushed these disloyal, treasonable thoughts from her. She loved Rex, despite his shortcomings, even perhaps because of them. She knew them by heart and forgave them all because—because he loved her. This

conclusion arrested her abruptly as if she had been checked by a sharp curb. She was compelled to face anew that dreadful doubt. Did he love her? Did he? . . . For even if in honor bound not to speak of it to her, he might at least have left her in no bitter uncertainty as to his fidelity. He could surely have found time to write frequently . . . yet he had scarcely written at all, and his few brief letters had been free of any implications of the kind.

San Salvo's voice sounded across her thoughts. It was a little harsh, as if with a rigorously suppressed emotion; its soft musical timbre that she had found so agreeable was gone.

"I want you to realize, Miss Rydal, that there's nothing I wouldn't do for you!"

She thought he must have forced himself to utter the words to present her with even this much knowledge of what was passing in his mind.

"Thank you," she said.

"You see, I've thought of you a great deal ever since our meeting in London. It was really to see you again that I came here. My business in Cerva wasn't urgent—it could have waited till the summer. And it wasn't easy for me to leave Rome just now, but when Bligh wrote and told me of your mother's illness I felt I couldn't put it off any longer—that I mustn't let anything stand in the way——"

"It was most awfully kind of you," she murmured, touched in spite of herself.

It was no more possible for her to be perfectly indifferent to his presence than it had been in London. She liked to think that he hadn't forgotten her during the months of their separation, that she had played a quite definite part in his thoughts and remembrance. And then she recalled Sir Gaspard's words, when he had entreated

her not to send Paul away for any reason in the world should he ever come to her to tell her of his love and plead his cause.

Across his undisguised solicitude for her welfare she was able to discern that deeper emotion of which he had not as yet spoken to her. Was it true that she had won his love so easily, so as it were without effort? Just because her face, her personality, appealed to him?

She thought then that if she had never seen Rex, she might have learned to love him. He was so very much alive; he gave her a sense of both strength and security—things that Rex could never remotely adumbrate in his nonchalant, capricious, unreliable character. This comparison of the two men chilled her heart with something of despair.

She looked suddenly at San Salvo and said:

"Do you believe in prayer?"

For a moment he was startled, the question was so unexpected, there had been nothing in their conversation to lead up to it. Then he answered guardedly:

"Oh, yes. I'm afraid I'm not at all devout, although I value my religion very much. But one need not be so very devout to believe in prayer."

"Then will you pray for my mother, please?"

"But of course. . . . I mean, I've been praying for her ever since I heard she was ill."

"You see, I'm afraid she's very ill. Worse than anyone suspects. It frightens me."

"Then let me do what I was going to suggest, and send for a specialist from Genoa. I know of a first-rate man with a European reputation. A telegram would bring him in the morning."

"Oh, no, please don't do that. It would alarm her so, poor darling!"

The sympathetic tones of his voice indubitably indicated

a wish to associate himself in her present anxiety, to help her if possible. Would Rex have done as much? Once again she had to quench that rising disloyalty with a certain deliberate resolution. It was not always easy to make excuses for Rex.

"It would be no trouble—I should be so glad if you'd let me do it. And don't think me officious or interfering, but I do so feel you ought to have further advice and help." He ended on an abrupt note.

She considered the matter. After all, she was very anxious, feeling that those constant paroxysms of coughing could not but debilitate the already weak heart. For the last fortnight there had been no progress, and whatever change could be observed was distinctly for the worse. She could always tell her mother that she had allowed herself to be overpersuaded by San Salvo in the matter of sending for this Genoese specialist.

"Perhaps for my mother's sake I oughtn't to refuse," she said at last. "I really do feel anxious and worried. They tell me there's no danger, but I've never seen her as ill as this before."

Her eyes shone strangely, as if with repressed tears. He turned away from her abruptly, thinking: "She mustn't cry—she mustn't! I couldn't bear it. I can never keep silent if she cries."

He knew then that he loved her, that he hadn't been mistaken in what he had sometimes roughly stigmatized to himself as his obsession for Laura Rydal. Even on his way to the Villa Mimosa that afternoon he had tried to assure himself that he was the victim of a passing infatuation which one glimpse of her would quickly destroy. He had often told himself that she could never be made to fit into this new life of his with its heavy duties and responsibilities. She was really, when you came to look at it, almost everything that his wife ought not to be. But

now, as he turned his head away, fearful lest she should suddenly break down in her grief and anxiety, he became aware past all doubting that she did stand for something in his life that was real, definite, exigent, overmastering. Whether she listened or not, he would some day have to ask her to be his wife. Not to-day perhaps, the hour was, to say the least of it, the reverse of propitious. But certainly before he left La Cerva he would be compelled to tell her how completely she was bound up with all his hopes of future happiness.

A fleeting vision of the old duchess passed before his eyes. The shabby, small figure with its priceless pearls and fine diamonds. The heavy black brows, the piercing eyes, the grim mouth. He could almost hear her saying: "Is this Englishwoman a Protestant?" And to his reply in the affirmative he could see her brows disappear into that iron-grey *coiffure* and the straight, thin lips set formidably in tacit disapproval.

V

He was silent, not daring yet to look at her. He thought the Italian landscape seemed to flow about her, the terraces of olive- and orange-trees, the yellow showers of mimosa, the splendid outline of Monte Celio, the blue sky, the hills dotted with graciously placed villas. He thought Cerva would always remain for him the most beautiful place in the world.

. . . They would come here every year when they were married, to recover the memory of that meeting. He checked himself. Of course she wasn't thinking of him. Her mind was deeply preoccupied with Lady Rydal, and if she had thought for anyone else it was assuredly for Rex Forde, with whose name London had so long coupled her own. A sudden scornful dislike of Rex seized him.

A man who had nothing in the world to give her, a vain, selfish, extravagant creature. Was there anything in it? He had tried to sound Darell Hayne on the subject, but Darell had only said he didn't think Lady Rydal approved of the idea and he couldn't tell what Laura thought about it. Rex was to be met occasionally at the house, so Lady Rydal's disapproval hadn't resulted in complete banishment. An ambitious, very worldly woman who adored Laura. Hayne's brief scraps of information, communicated at the station when San Salvo was on the point of leaving England, had made him wish that he had had sufficient time to gain the ear and sympathy of Lady Rydal.

Laura's dark blue eyes were fixed upon the scene before her. The hour of sunset was approaching and rose-pink clouds rimmed with gold were floating lazily across the turquoise blue of the sky. The sea was like silver, touched here and there with gold. The mountains were wrapping themselves about in the purple dusk of their night garments. The crooked, irregular line of houses that had formed the old fishing village of La Cerva was heavily silhouetted in black against the pale sea beyond.

When she spoke again her voice was cool and devoid of emotion.

"Shall you stay here long?" she inquired.

"It depends. I shan't go till my business is finished," he answered guardedly.

"Have you much to do?"

"I hardly know yet."

There was an intentional reserve in his tone that yet seemed to imply that his principal business in Cerva concerned herself. She was touched and flattered. She had never been quite indifferent to him, and to-day she felt less so than ever. He captured and held her imagination; she felt his power, his determination to impose his will upon

hers. And it was difficult not to surrender, not to acquiesce, when obviously his principal concern was to be of practical use to her.

"Don't you find Cerva a little dull?" she asked, envying him his power of going away at any moment.

"No—I was glad to see it again. When I was a little boy I used to come here with my mother, and it revives my memories of her, which I'm afraid are not very clear ones. It was only a fishing village then, with just a few old villas and one ancient castle. A charming place. It's spoilt now with all those bungalows."

"It must have been a happy time for you," she said, conscious of a wish to know a little more about him.

"Yes, it was very happy. But she died when I was six, and I was left almost entirely to my grandmother's care. I wanted my mother dreadfully at first. She was very loving, you know—she used to spoil me. I missed that love. My grandmother was very stern and strict. When I was older she told me she had done her best to counteract Camilla's influence. Camilla was my mother. I asked her why, and she answered: 'Because if she had lived, she would have ruined you.' Ruined me? Why, I would have died for her! She was so beautiful and tender. I have never forgotten her love for me."

Even now that childish but imperishable memory could evoke a passionate emotion in the stern, repressed man.

"You must have been very unhappy," she offered timidly.

"Children are fortunately never long conscious of being happy or unhappy. Things pass and fade, you only realize their effect upon you long afterwards. But they are still there, coloring all that follows, shaping you in some indescribable way, never forgotten. . . . I can of course remember accurately the mad rage that seized me when

my grandmother said those words. But I was too much afraid of her to show it."

"Is she very fond of you?"

He smiled grimly.

"I'm rather in favor just now. How long I shall remain so is another matter. Our wills haven't come into conflict yet."

His eyes grew cold, as if he were envisaging some imaginary combat. Then he added impulsively:

"She wants to choose my wife for me. There's a girl in Rome she's very anxious I should marry."

Laura colored faintly. "And you?" she asked.

"I recognize her eminent suitability, but unfortunately I don't love her, and what's more, I could never love her. I've become too English in my ideas not to reserve the right of choice to myself."

"Have you said that to your grandmother?"

"Not in so many words. But my leaving Rome just now must have shown her I wasn't keen."

So the conflict was being fought secretly, without open warfare, and Laura wondered how far that early formative influence would prevail. For in some ways she could see a difference in San Salvo. He was more definitely Italian now. He had absorbed in these few months much that belonged to Italy.

He added, laughing: "She's terribly distressed at my anglicization. It's what she fought so against after my mother's death."

A bell rang sharply twice and Laura rose quickly to her feet.

"That's mother's bell—she always rings twice. Will you forgive me? I must go to her."

"I shall look in to-morrow. If Ferrari can come I'll meet him at the station and motor him up. Like that, we shan't lose any time."

"That'll be very kind of you. I can't bear giving you so much trouble."

He lifted her hand to his lips and looked down at her for a moment as if searching her face. But except that it was paler than usual, there was no change in it. Her hair, very smoothly arranged, with its deep wave, had the effect of being fashioned from some bright metal that undulated a little. That pallor suited her—it made her hair and eyes so bright.

"It was very nice of you to come," she murmured.

"I am glad I came," said San Salvo.

He left her hurriedly and Laura went thoughtfully upstairs.

CHAPTER V

I

LAURA paused a moment on the landing before entering her mother's room. Now that it was over, she found herself puzzled and faintly excited by San Salvo's visit, and at the sense of sudden intimacy it had produced between them. It was comforting, too, to think of the assistance he was so eager to render. She no longer felt so utterly alone. He would return on the morrow—the prospect gave her both pleasure and consolation.

If it had only been Rex! . . . Surely it should have been his right to come to her now, offering every help he could possibly bestow. But she was perfectly aware that even if she had summoned him, he would have been of little use. He would have bemoaned the tragedy of their separation and the impecuniosity which rendered it in Lady Rydal's eyes inevitable, but he would certainly never have stirred a finger to summon a specialist. But even this momentary disloyalty distressed her. You couldn't expect of people more than they had to give. She remembered one of Charmian's worldly-wise remarks: "Hugo's given me money and a good position and as much love as he's capable of, so I should be a fool if I asked romance of him too." And Laura felt, in exactly the same way, that it would be foolish to demand unselfishness and sacrifice of Rex. He wasn't built that way. He was adorable, but he lacked the heroic qualities. It was she

who spent so recklessly, so prodigally. She sighed. Her heart ached a little, as it always did when she was forced to examine him too closely. But you loved him—didn't you?—for what he was, not for what he hadn't got. . . .

If only she could have prevented herself from perpetually comparing him with San Salvo. . . . But perhaps it was natural. They were the only two men who had ever shown her very particular attention. And though she loved Rex, she could not be blind to those qualities in San Salvo which did seem to indicate strength and security, and which attracted her to him, almost, as it seemed, against her will.

She went into her mother's room, moving very quietly. Lady Rydal was propped up against a mass of pillows, gasping for breath.

"What a long time you've been gone," she said, almost with reproach in her voice.

Laura sat down by the bedside.

"I had a visitor," she said.

"Was it Sir Gaspard? Warner said she heard a man's voice."

"No—it was San Salvo. He was so sorry to hear of your illness—he came to ask how you were. He's staying with Sir Gaspard."

Lady Rydal's face brightened a little; she gazed anxiously at Laura. Of course the girl did look tired—she had been shut up in the house too much of late owing to this stupid illness—but she was looking also extraordinarily pretty. That blue dress suited her to perfection. She was glad to think San Salvo had seen her thus, prettier even than she had been in London.

"Oh, then he did remember?" she said.

"Yes. He was frightfully kind. But, mother—I'm sorry—I did have to let him have his own way. He was

so insistent. He's going to bring a friend of his—a specialist—here from Genoa to-morrow to see you."

Laura leaned forward and took her mother's hand. And as she looked at her she felt her own throat close up with fear. She seemed to realize for the first time that Lady Rydal was very ill. She had grown so thin, so emaciated, in these last few weeks. Something of her youthful appearance had left her. Up till the time of their departure from England she had looked almost like a girl, with her soft brown hair, her delicate skin, her bright blue eyes. She had been young enough still to enjoy life. A great tenderness welled up in Laura's heart. The constraint that had arisen between them since the dismissal of Rex last summer seemed to melt away. Laura blamed herself for having attributed that separation entirely to her mother's action. A man who had really cared would have mocked at such barriers. Again she felt that shadowy disloyalty darkening her thoughts. Did Rex love her? Did he? She forced herself to dwell upon that burning moment when he had held her in his arms and told her of his love. Oh, there had surely been no doubt about it then . . . as little doubt of his love as of her own.

She thought of that other man who had just gone from her. Cold, reserved, enigmatic, with a suggestion of power she could not but be aware of. She was glad to think he would return on the morrow. She wanted to tell him of these new fears that were crowding her mind. If further trouble and anxiety awaited her, she felt he would prove a rock upon which she could confidently lean.

Rex's image could only cruelly torment her. When she thought of him now, she felt so restless that she longed to run out into the garden and walk there for hours, trying by dint of sheer physical effort to banish him from her mind. The four walls of the sick room imprisoned her.

II

At the touch of her daughter's hand Lady Rydal gazed at her, smiling. She felt that Laura had not found it quite easy to inform her of the impending visit of the specialist from Genoa, and that was why she had attached the whole of the responsibility to San Salvo.

Lady Rydal did not rebel. She knew that she was getting weaker. She had rather wished to have a second opinion, not that she really believed anyone could do anything for her.

"I like San Salvo," continued Laura presently, relieved that her mother refrained from offering any objection to the project. "I think you would like him too, if you knew him better. But I'm afraid he isn't very happy living with his grandmother in Rome."

"But I suppose he isn't obliged to live with her? A man of his age——"

"Well, you see, she's there in the palace."

"I've always rather pitied Italians for their patriarchal mode of living. It must be so very uncomfortable. They seem more like tribes than families. However, when he marries I suppose he will give up living with her."

"He could hardly turn her out of the palace," said Laura.

"No, but he'll find an apartment for her upstairs somewhere. That's what they generally do."

As she lay back against the mountain of pillows, she thought, and not for the first time, of Laura's future. She would be quite, quite alone. And though she didn't know it, she wouldn't be at all well off. That was why it would have been so fatal to let her marry Rex Forde. Rex wanted money—a great deal of it—and although he loved Laura, the discovery that she wasn't as rich as he had

supposed but that she was, on the contrary, almost poor might have had a very deleterious effect upon that love.

Lady Rydal had sometimes blamed herself for the harshness she had displayed towards the lovers, as well as for her cowardice in not frankly revealing its true motive to her daughter, thus saving her from a good deal of pain and bewilderment. But now she believed that she had acted wisely. The separation was working its own cure. The return of San Salvo seemed to inaugurate a new era, a new vista of happiness for Laura.

"If San Salvo comes again to-morrow, I should like to see him," murmured Lady Rydal.

"Yes, dearest," said Laura.

Her mother liked him. She had never cordially liked Rex, never approved of that intimacy even before it had so suddenly blossomed into love. Laura felt almost jealous for Rex. He charmed most people, but he had never managed to please Lady Rydal. It was just as if she had seen him too closely and couldn't bear the thought of his marrying her daughter. Mothers were often like that—they had an instinctive dislike to certain men if they suspected them of any desire to marry their daughters.

Lady Rydal wondered now if Laura had suffered greatly from that inhibition. In any case, however, she had borne it in silence and without apparent resentment.

But Laura had felt the difficulty of the situation thus created in every nerve. The two of them, always watching her on those rare occasions when they did meet and were together. Trying to counteract each other's moves just as if they had been engaged in some curious game of chess. That was how it had been during those last weeks in London. Looking back, Laura felt that if she had been sure of Rex she would have found it more supportable. Only she had never, except for about ten minutes, felt quite sure.

Just now when she had been talking to San Salvo, she could not help feeling that he created about her a wonderful, limpid atmosphere in which she saw things quite clearly and in their right proportion. No dusky corners, or nebulous forms, no sense of having to grope in the dark after something that constantly eluded you, but a place of light, flooded with sunshine and swept by clean, strong sea breezes, where you could breathe freely. Of late with Rex she had sometimes almost feared to move or speak lest by some gesture or word she should inadvertently make implications or suggestions capable of misinterpretation.

"I should like to see him again. He seemed to me a very charming sensible young man."

"Yes," agreed Laura absently. Then she said impulsively and perhaps a little irrelevantly: "Mother, did you never think of marrying again?"

Lady Rydal looked at her in astonishment. Then she said quietly: "Yes, I did once. What makes you ask? It was about twelve years ago when you and Charmy were children."

Laura made a hasty calculation. Her mother must have been at that time about thirty-three years old, and perhaps at the height of her beauty.

"Then why?"

"Oh, there was a good deal against it."

"You didn't care for him, perhaps?"

"Oh, it wasn't that. I was very much in love with him. I liked him better than any man I'd ever known." She made this confession with a simplicity that astonished her daughter. "But he was governor of one of our Crown colonies. I should have had to separate myself from you and Charmy. Charmy didn't matter so much—she was always quite as happy with other people—but I knew you'd never be. So when it came to the point I felt I

couldn't. The climate was bad—I shouldn't have dared to take you with me. There were others of course more recently, but no one for whom I cared at all."

"Did he marry?" asked Laura.

"Oh, yes, not long afterwards. In his position he needed a wife. He has been dead now about five years."

Laura thought: "Then she did make sacrifices for us, especially for me. She did really love us." She said aloud: "Did it hurt you to make that decision?"

"Yes, very much indeed. It was a long time before I could bring myself to tell him. But I don't think I should ever have been happy if I'd left my children. You were such a little delicate thing—you clung to me so——" She paused, looking at Laura with strangely bright eyes.

"You weren't sorry afterwards?"

"No. I made the choice quite deliberately. If I had had to make it again I should have decided in the same way."

She leaned back a little, closing her eyes. Laura watched her with an almost passionate anxiety.

"She had the right to send Rex away—if she really did send him," Laura thought. "She'd earned the right because of her sacrifice."

Yet the question could never have been quite a simple one. Supposing each generation played only for its own hand? No thought of sacrifice, but just going forward with the determination to secure as much personal profit and happiness as possible. It would have counted both ways. Her mother, making a new life with a second husband, perhaps rather an important, dazzling life illuminated with a touch of romance, and leaving her two little girls to the care of Sophia Marley and Patience Percival. And in that case Laura would perhaps have found herself at the age of eighteen perfectly free to marry Rex Forde, not feeling that she owed her mother this passionate loy-

alty. And then she thought of the happy years they had spent together—years abundantly blessed by that beloved presence . . . she was so glad to have had them, they had held for her such beautiful tender memories. But surely if her mother had loved that other man very deeply she couldn't have let him go for any reason in the world? To put her children first she must also have loved them best. People always tried to reconcile love and duty, and yet they were eternally opposed to each other. Love stood beckoning in the sunlight, while duty, grave and stern, chained you to the shadows.

Lady Rydal opened her eyes; they looked, Laura thought, a little dim and faded. No longer of such a bright blue. . . .

"You see, you were very delicate as a child. I never felt I could trust you to anyone else." She smiled, a remote, reminiscent smile. She had so loved her younger daughter . . . a fair, dainty little thing . . . a dream child. . . .

"So it was for my sake more than for Charmy's?" Laura asked.

"Yes. I don't know if it's the same with all mothers, but I always had a different feeling for you, even from the first. I tried never to show it, but when Charmy went her own way I couldn't blame her. I felt that subconsciously she knew she didn't owe me as much as you, for instance, owed me. I don't know why I'm telling you all this."

"But I'm so glad you've told me," said Laura, immensely touched.

"So you mustn't blame me if you think I've sometimes gone against you. It was for your sake—to save you from pain and disappointment. I wish I could have lived to see you happily married. But if things don't turn out

quite as you wish, you must forgive me. It's all been a little difficult . . . since Charmy married."

"She is thinking of Rex," Laura said to herself. Still, her mother's ambiguous words did awaken within her a faint apprehension. She seemed to be blaming herself for something. . . .

III

San Salvo arrived early on the following afternoon accompanied by the specialist Professor Ferrari, and the doctor from La Cerva. The three men drove up to the villa in San Salvo's car, and Laura, who had been awaiting their arrival with considerable nervous anxiety, was relieved to hear the purr of the engine as it ascended the slope from the gate.

Lady Rydal was less well that day. She had had a disturbed, almost sleepless night and had taken but little nourishment. Laura felt for the first time thoroughly uneasy about her. She had hardly left her during the past twenty-four hours, and was beginning to feel worn out and in need of further help.

"I must have a nurse for the night," she thought. "I wish Charmian would come. I think I'll telegraph for her."

She only hoped the physician would be able to drive all these crowding thoughts and black fears from her mind. Surely he would tell her that there was no cause for this anxiety and terror, and that her mother would soon be better. She assured herself that he would give a hopeful verdict.

She went into the garden to meet them. San Salvo hurriedly introduced Ferrari to her and they all three entered the house.

From the first Ferrari inspired her with confidence.

He was a small, dark, broad-shouldered man with penetrating black eyes. He spoke fluent but broken English.

"How is Lady Rydal?" San Salvo asked.

"She had a very bad night and coughed incessantly. I don't think she seems so well. Her temperature's higher. Will you come up and see her?" She turned to the doctors and led the way upstairs.

San Salvo remained in the salotto. A big wood fire was burning there; he held out his long thin hands and warmed them at the flames. Presently he lit a cigarette, and idly turned over the leaves of some English picture papers that were lying on a table. Something of Laura's anxiety and uneasiness had communicated itself to him. This illness was perhaps destined to prove more serious than they had supposed. His help had come none too soon.

. . . It wasn't the moment, of course, to speak of his love. Laura was far too much occupied with Lady Rydal to listen to anything of the kind and this alone would diminish his already meager chance of success. She would certainly regard any declaration of the kind as an intrusion. They were such strangers to each other! They had met only four times. It was his visit, just when she was so anxious and also so tragically alone in her anxiety, that had created a kind of superficial intimacy between them. With himself of course it was different; she could never again seem like a stranger to him since she had dwelt so persistently in his thoughts during the seven months of their separation, becoming thus almost an integral part of his life. And yesterday she had welcomed him with a certain relief, just as if he had been an old friend. To meet even a casual acquaintance in new or unaccustomed surroundings often produced a sense of false intimacy; he had felt that very strongly sometimes in London when accosted by Italians whom he knew but slightly.

He no longer attempted to deny that he had been powerfully attracted by Laura Rydal even from the first. It wasn't only because of her beauty although that in his eyes was perfect, but there was something spiritual about her that charmed him. Never before had he seen a woman whom he wished to marry, nor had he believed himself capable of falling very violently in love. Besides, he had always associated the thought of matrimony with his own return to Italy, when it would be time enough to think of settling down with a woman of his own race and religion. Not of course with an Englishwoman as his father had done. Mixed marriages were not always successful, and he knew that his parents hadn't been extraordinarily happy together. His grandmother's fault perhaps. She was a tyrant of the old school, a survival of more authoritative and less undisciplined days. And she was still there, wonderfully young for her seventy odd years, astonishingly alive and vigorous. The old palace was ruled by her from attic to cellar, nor was she in the least inclined to yield the scepter to another, least of all to her grandson. She made him feel like a guest in his own house. What would she say to Laura? . . .

Oh, he knew quite well what she would say! Like the Vestal Virgins and other privileged spectators of the gladiatorial combats she would turn down her thumbs in unhesitating condemnation. San Salvo stirred uncomfortably, pushing his chair back from the fire as if its heat had suddenly become unbearable. His thoughts were fantastic; they had travelled too far . . . there was really no chance of his ever being able to present Laura to her as her future granddaughter-in-law. There was that talk of an engagement between her and Rex Forde. Rex was undeniably in love with her, but he had no money. Still, he had no clue as to the extent of Laura's liking for

him; it was said she had suffered because her mother wouldn't permit the match.

He heard a stir of footsteps and voices in the hall, and, springing to his feet, he went to the door and opened it. He saw Laura standing there in earnest conversation with the two doctors, and perceived to his dismay that Ferrari's face was unusually grave.

It was too late to retreat, and Laura by a slight and scarcely perceptible gesture invited him to join them.

To-day she was wearing a dress of white knitted wool; it made her slight, straight figure look almost childish and its pale hue emphasized the pearly tints of her fair coloring. Her violet-grey eyes were fixed questioningly, almost in fear, upon Ferrari's dark, blunt face.

"Of course you must have a couple of nurses at once," he was saying. "I'll send them over from Genoa this evening. You can't go on any longer, and these cases require very careful nursing." His tone was guarded, nevertheless San Salvo gained the impression that his secret opinion was highly unfavorable.

"Do you think I ought to send for my sister? She's my mother's only other child."

Ferrari considered this for a moment.

"It might be as well. Your mother's condition to-day gives rise to a certain anxiety. We have diagnosed pneumonia in the right lung. So if you think she would wish to see your sister——"

Laura did not speak; she kept her eyes on the ground, and her lips were firmly compressed. Would her mother wish it? Or wasn't it a question rather of what Charmian herself would wish if she knew the truth? While she dreaded the intrusion of that very vital personality, she felt that she hadn't any right to keep her uninformed as to the progress of affairs at La Cerva.

The two doctors went into the study to discuss the

case, like jurymen retiring to consider their verdict. In about a quarter of an hour they had left the villa, travelling in San Salvo's car. He declined to accompany them, declaring that he preferred to walk back. His real motive, however, was to have a few minutes' talk alone with Laura, for he felt that if she ever needed him, she would need him now, just when the first note of alarm had been sounded and she had learned that there was actual and definite cause for anxiety.

IV

When the car had rolled away again, San Salvo went back to the salotto with Laura and sat beside the fire.

"If you wish to go up to your mother," he said presently, "you mustn't bother about me. I only stayed to see if I could be of any use to you. For instance, if you wished to telegraph to your sister I could take the message down for you."

"That would be very kind. Do stay a little. I don't feel as if I could go back to her just yet."

She put her hands over her face, leaning forward a little so that he could only see her hair that looked to-day like some dull metal. At first he thought she was crying, but when at last she took away her hands and turned towards him, he saw that her face had lost nothing of its usual serenity. She was evidently deeply absorbed in the contemplation of some problem, and he secretly longed to learn its nature. He was beginning to feel that he had a right to know everything about her, and as if they had been flung into this unusual and abrupt intimacy for a special purpose. She would never perhaps forget that he had been with her at this profoundly emotional moment. Whatever happened in the future, he would

always and inevitably be associated in her mind with this time of unparalleled anxiety.

Almost, too, he felt that she must be aware of his love, of his passionate preoccupation with her and all that concerned her.

"I must send for Charmian. She ought to come. She ought to be here," she exclaimed suddenly, as if she were presenting him with the solution of the problem that had been perplexing her.

"Yes. I suppose you'll have to do that," he assented.

"Ferrari didn't say much. But he's taken away the little hope I had." She fixed her dark, violet-grey eyes upon his face.

"Don't, please, lose hope," he entreated.

"Have you decided yet how long you're going to stay in Cerva?" she asked, prompted as he thought by a desire to change the subject of conversation.

"No. But you must see I shouldn't dream of leaving while I can be of any use to you."

He thought he could read relief in her face. So she didn't want him to go. He wasn't in the way. She needed his help, his companionship in that immense desolate solitude of hers. His heart stirred at the thought.

"You mustn't inconvenience yourself on my account," she said gently. "But it would be very kind of you to stay—to come and see me whenever you care to—until my sister can get here."

She saw that he stood between her and a loneliness she could hardly dare to face. Yet she was thinking desultorily: "I don't love him. I'm only selfish. It seems unfair to ask him to stay on. I love Rex." In her determined loyalty to Rex she felt that she had no right to solicit or accept help from San Salvo. But then Rex was far away, unknowing, uncaring, indifferent. Even if she wanted him, sent for him, he would probably not come. He hated

illness . . . he disliked to see people when they were unhappy or anxious. He liked you to be always gay and prosperous and amusing. The thought of Rex just now was like an added torture. . . .

She rose and went to the writing-table and took out a sheet of paper. San Salvo watched her; it seemed to him there was beauty in her every movement, an instinctive grace that he found enchanting. She sat there, pen in hand, idle, inert, as if unable to concentrate. Even this trivial task was too much for her. He guessed that her thoughts were full of her mother; she was aware and afraid.

He did not speak, and presently he heard her pen faintly scratching the paper.

Mother not so well. Come if possible.—Laura.

She stared at the words, almost as if she couldn't grasp their meaning. Come if possible . . . she didn't want to frighten Charmian by sending a more peremptory message. Besides, she wasn't sure. There was always hope. The cleverest doctors made mistakes. *Mother dying—come at once* . . . no, she couldn't send that message. It would be false. They hadn't said that Lady Rydal was dying. Only that there was grave cause for anxiety.

She tried to picture the arrival of the telegram, the endless discussion it would evoke. Was it necessary to start off at once? Wouldn't it really be much safer and wiser to wait for the next telegram? Charmian always had such countless engagements that a sudden summons could hardly ever fail to reach her at a highly inconvenient moment. And if she did decide to come, someone would be at the telephone for hours, putting off this engagement and that. "Such a bore—of course I know it's nothing, Laura's a little fool, the least thing scares her to death. . . . " She

could hear Charmian's high-pitched voice saying the words. "Mother's as strong as a horse really. Those thin, pale women always are. Oh, I suppose I shall have to go, but nothing will induce me to start to-night. I shall just put it across Laura if I find she's been crying 'Wolf!'"

Hugo too who intensely disliked being parted from his wife, would certainly counsel delay. What was the use of taking that long tiresome journey for nothing? Now if it had been Nice. . . .

Charmian would be little likely to leave London that night. She would probably wire for further news and details. But if she thought of it she might possibly telephone to Rex. She and Rex were quite good friends. When Laura wasn't in London, she often invited him to her house.

Laura came back to the fireside and gave the sheet of paper to San Salvo.

"Do you really mind sending this telegram?"

"Of course I don't. I have to go down to Cerva in any case."

He thrust it into his pocket.

"How much will it cost, do you think?"

"Oh, I'll tell you to-morrow. Don't trouble about that."

"I wonder if she'll come," Laura said.

"Haven't you urged her to?"

"No. I didn't want to frighten her."

She sat there like one in a dream. She longed to shake herself free from the horrible nightmare that had suddenly encompassed her. It wasn't true—of course it wasn't true. Her mother was going to get perfectly well. She had often been ill before, and had always recovered, giving evidence of a remarkable recuperative power. These doctors knew nothing about her; they were unaware of this resistant quality in her.

Suddenly everything seemed a little unreal to her. Even

the house—San Salvo—the sun shining on the olive-trees and upon the blue, blue waters of the bay. It was all part of the dream that had just assumed such a monstrous, incredible aspect. Only when one came back to hard facts she realized that there was danger, that she had actually had to send for Charmian—it would be sheer folly now to evade the issue. Braver, perhaps, to keep it steadily in mind, and face it just as one might courageously regard a grizzly spectre that had suddenly arisen in one's path. To turn your head away wouldn't dispel it. You knew all the time it was there, drawing ever nearer to disclose its malevolent design and purpose.

"I shall come back to-morrow morning," said San Salvo.

"Thank you—that'll be very kind. I hope my mother will be able to see you. She said yesterday she'd like to."

She felt her hand grasped firmly in his. Then he lifted it to his lips and kissed it. He did not at once release it, and she felt an odd comfort in his touch. It seemed to assure her that she wasn't quite alone and friendless amid these scenes of threatened disaster. She knew too that he wasn't quite indifferent to her. He would be near at hand in case she wanted him, would be ready to proffer practical help.

"I'm very grateful to you," she said.

Their eyes met. She knew then that he loved her; it came too with a kind of shock, for she had never imagined that he would want to marry her. He loved her and his one desire was to serve her. She tried to free herself from this conviction, but as he left her, grave and stern, and without even uttering a conventional farewell, she was aware that the emotion she had aroused within him was of a permanent and authentic nature. And sooner or later she would have to listen to him and answer him. She shrank from the thought. Rex stood eternally between them.

CHAPTER VI

I

LADY RYDAL had no further need of doctors. She had no further need of anyone on earth, not even of her beloved Laura, whose voice was the last she heard. She died that night from sudden failure of the heart's action, in the presence of Laura and the nurses. They had had no warning that she was worse. Only a few minutes before, she had spoken to her daughter in the feeble exhausted voice to which during the last few days Laura had become so sadly accustomed. The girl had bent over her a little, telling her that she would feel better in the morning, and that she hoped she would be well enough to see San Salvo when he came.

Lady Rydal smiled faintly. Her head fell back a little. The nurse felt her pulse, alarmed at some slight but subtle change that had come over her.

"She's gone," she said.

Laura started violently.

"Gone?" she repeated.

At first she didn't understand, or rather her mind pretended not to understand, resisting the information as one consciously rejects some hideous untruth. But her heart told her that the end had come. Swiftly, silently, without any perceptible struggle, mercifully, almost, as one might say, tenderly. Death in one of his benign moods. . . .

Laura clasped her mother's hand, but it fell limp and inert from hers. She bent over her and kissed her and

cried, "Mother—Mother!" in a crescendo of anguish. The pale, smiling lips made no reply.

The two nurses led her gently away. They told her that she could do no more for her mother; they urged her, as they might have urged a child, to go to her room and rest. She must be so very tired, and now there was nothing she could do. She listened to them with a dazed, stupefied expression upon her face, but she submitted and went across the landing to her bedroom, feeling stunned and bewildered and yet vaguely excited as if something stupendous had happened to her.

She sat there by the open window. Night had fallen upon the world, submerging it in a black flood that flowed over everything. There were no stars; it was a cloudy night of heavy, sickly sirocco. In the distance she could hear the crisp sound of the sea, breaking with rhythmic regularity on the shore, far, far below. Sometimes the darkness would be pricked by a sudden light that flashed out, moving slowly. The lamp perhaps of some fishing vessel. It seemed to stab the darkness like a red wound.

Laura did not cry; she felt no grief; it was as if her very heart had been turned to stone, so that it was no longer capable of any definite sensation. But her body felt fearfully strong and vigorous, just as if it were immortal and would go on living forever amid these scenes of extraordinary devastation.

Her thoughts continually tried to elude and evade the truth, but always they returned like homing birds to the point of torture that could alone detain them, and she could hear the nurse repeating over and over again those incredible words, "She's gone." . . .

Everything, past, present, and future, seemed to centre around that burning moment. There was Charmian, for instance. She couldn't arrive in time. Laura had the

sense of having betrayed her sister in not letting her know sooner of her mother's illness.

And the aunts. . . . She would have to send them a telegram too in the morning. There was no possibility of doing so to-night, the post-office was shut hours ago. In a couple of days they would all be here—Charmian, Hugo, Mrs. Marley, and Patience—assembling to convict her of negligence and perhaps even of wilful malice in keeping them so long in ignorance. They would never believe that she hadn't from the first known about the danger. . . .

Yet it was little more than twelve hours ago that Ferrari had uttered the first grave note of alarm. Even then she hadn't really believed him. Sending that telegram to Charmian had simply been a precautionary measure. She had counted so confidently upon that wonderful recuperative power displayed by her mother in so many former illnesses.

She must send Ferrari a telegram too; he had said he would come again that day, and now there was no need for him to do so. Everything was useless now. . . .

She sat there, her hands folded passively in her lap, her large brilliant eyes staring into that black pool beyond the window. The lights of the houses made a glittering fiery rim dividing the darkness of the land from the more shadowy, less solid darkness of the sea. Her thoughts were chaotic and resisted all the mental processes by which she tried to control and co-ordinate them. They succeeded each other with bewildering rapidity; in their random inconsequence they seemed to have no connection at all. There was Rex, for instance. Coming and going, never long absent, always ready to spring into the foreground of her mental vision and occupy the principal place there. Her wish to see him now was almost stronger

than any other emotion; she wanted him to be there, comforting her. . . . Her mother hadn't wished her to marry him; one of the few definitely tyrannical actions of her life had been to separate them arbitrarily. She must have had some reason for doing that. She wasn't a capricious, impulsive woman. But death had abruptly removed those barriers of Lady Rydal's making. Rex could come now, whenever he wished, without let or hindrance, and she was free to receive him, to listen to his words of love. She thrilled a little at the thought even across the sense of blinding misery and loss that possessed her, enfolding her as it were in a sable garment. She pictured him coming gaily up the steep path from the road, under the branching mimosas, the fragile bird-cherries, between the beds of parrot tulips and scented hyacinths and blue and crimson cinerarias. She held her breath almost as if he had actually been approaching her. Her heart, freed by this immense disaster, went out to him as never before; he was now the sole object of her loyalty and love. She could almost feel his presence and hear his voice. And then suddenly his image was blotted out, became one with the night and with those formless, motionless black trees, was submerged in the dark flood that flowed over land and sea. She had made a mistake . . . it wasn't Rex—it was San Salvo's lean, austere form, dominant, powerful, claiming her as his own. . . . He loved her, and she could not tell whether the knowledge brought her joy or pain; it was one of those tremendous elemental happenings that can produce no reaction of mere emotion. It was immense, catastrophic—something that could alter the whole plan and pattern of one's life.

He would come to-day. He had promised to come. In her shivering loneliness and desolation there was solace in the thought.

II

But she couldn't count upon being alone for long. Very soon Charmian and the aunts and perhaps even Hugo would descend upon her. The villa would be full of voices, of stir and sound. She thought of these people as birds of prey hovering around the poor motionless body. Laura shuddered as she pictured her solitude being thus abruptly invaded. They would discuss the cause of the illness; they would question her as to its development; they would blame her for not sending sooner for a specialist and also for her want of frankness in regard to themselves. She would have to give every little detail, reconstructing the scene. . . .

She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes, looking like a very tired and unhappy child whose grief pursues it across the borderland of sleep. When she awoke it was very cold and the pale silver dawn had flowed into the room, dispersing the darkness. Rain was falling with a soft, lisping sound upon the leaves. Laura rose and, taking off her dress, crept into bed. She knew quite well what had happened, but she was too tired to think about it now. She wanted to sleep and sleep and sleep. . . .

In the morning Warner brought her some coffee and rolls, setting the tray on a table near her bedside. Her bed was placed so that she could see the sea, but to-day the view was made all misty with rain so that Monte Celio looked pale and transparent, a filmy shadow dividing the twin greynesses of sky and sea.

She drank her coffee but felt disinclined to eat. Some dreadful blow had, she knew, fallen upon her, crushing her. All the time her thoughts were consciously edging away from it. She didn't want to remember that her mother was dead. Still, there were those telegrams to be

sent. She glanced at the clock. It was nearly nine. She must get up and write them at once.

When she had written the two telegrams, she rang the bell and gave them to the servant. Then she dressed herself quickly, combing out her bright, wavy short hair. Without thinking she put on the white dress she had worn yesterday. But she oughtn't to wear white. For months and months she must wear nothing but black. Charmian would have thought of that at once, would have dispatched a telegram to Genoa for mourning to be sent immediately. She wouldn't have lost a moment. Clothes were always one of her principal preoccupations.

There was a knock at the door and Warner reappeared, red-eyed and still weeping. Laura envied her those tears.

"The Duke of San Salvo to see you if you please, miss," she said, and even across her grief Laura could discern a certain snobbish triumph as she pronounced the name.

San Salvo . . . he had come early. She wondered if he had heard the news before he reached the house. Perhaps he had telephoned. Like a flock of fierce, dark birds the thoughts that had fought for the mastery in her brain before she had fallen asleep returned to her. She couldn't elude the truth any more. She must face it. She would have countless things to do. Death always brought a dismal array of business in its train.

San Salvo was downstairs. She mustn't keep him waiting. It was so very early for him to come. He must have started directly he heard the news, determined that she should not be alone a moment longer than was absolutely necessary. He had come because he loved her. The thought of his love touched her with a sensible warmth. She felt so frozen. . . .

He was waiting for her in the salotto, standing near the door and looking more grim and purposeful than ever,

although the sombre eyes were strangely soft and pitying beneath the dark, straight line of the brows.

She thought: "If he weren't so kind I should be afraid of him." But his touch was infinitely reassuring, and she let her hand lie in his passively for a moment, reluctant to remove it.

So he knew. She wouldn't have the fearful task of telling him.

"I'm so sorry," he said, "so dreadfully sorry."

His eyes had a kind of hidden brightness as if behind them there were unshed tears.

"Thank you," said Laura.

He led her to the sofa, and they sat there for a little in silence. He broke the pause by saying:

"Won't you tell me what you're going to do?"

"I haven't had time to think of it. I can't settle anything till my sister comes. She may think it best for me to remain here. You see, our house in London is let till April, and if I went home I should have to stay with Charmian or my aunts. I expect they will all be here the day after to-morrow." Her voice was cold and strained but perfectly calm. Indeed her composure startled him; it was so complete. She was frozen of course. The shock had stunned her. Her face bore no trace of tears, only that look of deadly fatigue.

"And then there'll be the funeral," she continued; "we shall have it the day after they come, I suppose. When I think of the future now, I can't see anything at all—it's all a dark mist."

A dark mist, peopled with nebulous, amorphous forms that moved as it were blindly across it and then vanished. Rex . . . Charmian . . . Perhaps Rex would want to marry her very soon, now that there were no longer any obstacles in the way. But always when she thought of him a great black doubt seemed to form in her mind, and

she knew that until she could see him or hear from him that doubt could not possibly be dispelled. But if he did wish for it, she supposed that she would stay with Charmian during the brief interim. She dreaded that; the ceaseless stir, the restlessness of her sister's house always confused and bewildered her. She had a great longing for peace, quite away from everyone, in a lonely country place where there would be no neighbors. Still, if she did stay with her sister it would only be for a short time. And it was no good making plans now when the whole world had suddenly become fluid and insubstantial—it seemed to quake and shiver before her as if moved by some mighty earthquake.

"You wouldn't stay here alone at your age, surely?" he said in an astonished tone.

Already he was beginning almost unconsciously to assimilate the opinions, prejudices, and standards of his own race, was secretly learning to deplore the immense, almost boundless freedom enjoyed by women of all ages in England. Especially by young women who were wealthy orphans and had been deprived of their legitimate guardians.

"There might be nothing else for me to do," she answered.

"But your sister surely wouldn't permit it!"

"Oh, I know she'd put me up for a few weeks, but as a permanency we should neither of us be able to endure it!"

"Your aunts?"

She gave a faint mirthless laugh, checked almost as soon as it was born.

"Not for the world! Even if they were ready to have me. I'd far rather be alone. If I can't have darling mother, I'd rather not have anyone."

The face of Rex rose before her then as if in mute

reproof, giving the lie to her words. Oh, if she could only feel quite, quite sure of Rex! He could with a word remove all that was ambiguous and perplexing in her present situation; he alone could destroy this intolerable uncertainty that forced her to speak so glibly of a future wherein he should play no part, and in which she was constrained to represent herself as necessarily alone. She ought to have been able to tell San Salvo categorically that she was engaged to be married. . . .

"You could have a companion," he suggested.

He was aghast at the prospect of her remaining quite alone at the Villa Mimosa, and pictured himself mentioning the fact to his grandmother should he ever approach her with the news of his engagement to Miss Rydal on his lips. She would be horrified; all her old-fashioned prejudices would be outraged; it would add to the already enormous sum of Laura's disabilities. He must prevent it if he possibly could. Perhaps he might find an opportunity to say something to Mrs. Karslake.

"Yes, of course I could," she assented. She didn't want to argue the point, or indeed any point. It didn't really matter what she did nor what became of her, supposing Rex showed that he didn't want to marry her now that she was free. Besides, it was as easy to agree as to disagree. And her words successfully lifted the cloud of perplexity from San Salvo's brow.

"You are too young and too beautiful to live alone," he said in a voice that was almost harsh with emotion. "I'm sure your sister will agree with me."

Laura looked straight in front of her.

"I don't feel young any more," she said.

The experience of the past twenty-four hours had definitely aged her, and she felt that something of the vitality of youth had left her forever. Life was flowing past her like a great turbid river, leaving her stranded

and alone upon the bank. The rapid current was bearing Rex away from her. She could give no reason for her complete certainty on this point. Still, there it was. When she thought of him now, she could only see his face as perturbed, enigmatic, perplexed. Not the face of the eager young lover. She checked herself. She couldn't be going to lose everything she loved, Rex as well as her mother. The one definite barrier between them had been removed by this appalling catastrophe that had befallen her. Surely he would be given back to her, even if it had had to be by this cruel means. Fate asked an immense price for that happiness. It was as if she had stood in front of Laura and said: "You shall have him, but you must pay the uttermost farthing."

If Rex failed her, the payment would have been made in vain. . . .

III

San Salvo's eyes were fixed upon her. He would have given all the world to know something of the trend of her thoughts. She seemed so far removed from him, and he felt that very soon those relations of hers might come and take her away altogether. She would go back to London, to Rex Forde, the man whom her mother hadn't wished her to marry. Oh, if he could only prevent that! He felt as if he were engaged in some bitter, protracted duel with that other man for the possession of Laura. He didn't like Rex, didn't trust him, didn't believe he would make the girl happy.

His face grew harsh and stern as he thought of him, it was as if some deep, subconscious emotion possessed him. She felt once more beyond all doubt that he loved her. To-day the knowledge held a curious solace.

"I want you to take me up to your mother's room," he said suddenly.

"Oh, but I haven't been there since she died," she said. She shrank away from him, almost as if in terror.

"Won't you come with me?" he said.

There was something of urgent entreaty in his voice, as if he wanted her to trample on her reluctance and accompany him. She reacted to it, and, rising, led the way upstairs. He followed her into the darkened chamber, where masses of white flowers made a heavy, almost cloying, fragrance. The room was lit only by two tall tapers set in carved gilt candlesticks placed one on each side of the bed, which stood now in the middle of the room.

The dead woman was lying there with a handkerchief over her face, and San Salvo, going forward, lifted it and for a moment gazed down upon the marble-like features. Laura turned her head abruptly away. She had never before seen death, and she didn't want to look at her mother now; she felt that it would sap her courage and the strong self-control she had imposed upon herself. But she watched San Salvo's subsequent movements with intent, observant eyes.

With a face of stone he knelt beside the bed and his lips moved in prayer. He was praying for her mother's soul. *Of your charity pray for the soul of Phyllis Rydal* . . . that was the Catholic formula. She realized then that not only had he returned to the practice of his faith but that, body and soul, he now belonged to Rome. A citizen of no mean city. . . . The knowledge intrigued her, increasing her profound interest in him. She thought he must have suffered some mystical process of regeneration from which he had emerged cleansed and purified.

Even now with her grief still so fresh she couldn't feel indifferent to his presence. She was glad he was there, she felt grateful to him for his prayers. No one else

had prayed, an omission which had never before struck her.

He rose from his knees, crossed himself once more, and stooping kissed Lady Rydal's hand with a kind of filial reverence. They left the room together, and although they had only been there a few minutes, they both felt as if the intimacy between them had deepened because she had allowed him to associate himself thus with her bereavement.

"Is there any use in praying for her now?" she asked rather pitifully, as they stood facing each other on the darkened landing.

"It is part of our faith to pray for the dead," he answered.

"I wish I knew what to say. I can't think of any words." Her face showed pale and remote in the dusk.

"It is usual to say the *De profundis* psalm," he told her.

"It must be an enormous consolation to believe you can still be of use to the dead. That they haven't gone completely beyond your care—that they still need you."

"Yes," he assented, looking at her curiously.

He wondered if he had sown the first little seed of faith in her heart. Religion often came to people through sorrow. They were aware of a desire not to lose touch with their beloved dead. The cry of soul to soul—urgent, passionate, appealing—sounding across the dread silence and darkness of death, awakened that primitive, pathetic desire.

"Miss Rydal—I must go now. But if you'll let me, I'd like to come back to-morrow."

"Oh, but of course," she said, giving him her hand. "I mean, I hope you'll come whenever you care to as long as you're here. Only you mustn't stay on at La Cerva if it's inconvenient just because you want to help me. My sister will be here very soon."

"I'm not in any hurry to go away," he answered. "Perhaps I have more important things to do here than anywhere. At any rate, I shan't go until your sister has arrived and you've been able to consult her about your plans for the future. Besides, there are formalities—I can help you with those."

So it was on her account that he had resolved to remain at La Cerva for the present. And somehow she didn't want him to go away—he stood between her and a complete loneliness that as yet she hardly dared to face.

She could count upon him too. His offers of help were not mere idle ones.

"You've been very kind to me," she said, and her voice trembled a little. "So many people wouldn't have liked to come the first day. But I'm sure you knew that you'd be welcome."

When he had gone, she thought almost bitterly:

"He's doing all the things Rex might have done, if he had chosen to come."

The thought of Rex hurt her.

IV

"Of course I ought to have been told long ago!" Charmian's voice was emphatic and querulous and held too a note of unusual fatigue. "I really can't imagine what you were about not to send for me. You'll never get me to believe either that mother didn't tell you to long ago! I'm perfectly certain she must have done so—she must have had things she wanted to say to me—but you were too lazy to take the trouble!"

Charmian was standing there in the hall, confronting her sister with dark, offended eyes. Behind her stood two muffled, amorphous figures that presently resolved themselves into the woebegone persons of Mrs. Marley and

Patience. Laura felt that they were silently echoing Charmian's reproachful accusations. Now and then a faint sob emanated from Patience. She didn't want to be hard on Laura, who must have had her poor little hands quite full, still of course she *had* given them all unnecessary suffering.

She looked so young in her short black dress. Her pale hair made a patch of sunlight in the dusk of the hall. When you came nearer to her, you couldn't help seeing that her face wore a queer frozen look.

Laura realized now that she had actually expected Rex to travel out with the three ladies. He would surely lose no time in identifying himself with them, taking his rightful place as a future member of the family. That he hadn't come was a bitter disappointment to her, emphasizing all her doubts of him, making her feel that her mother's death, instead of bringing them together, had accentuated the distance between them. She checked an insane impulse to ask for news of him.

Things were more supportable when the travellers had retired to their respective rooms to remove the grimy traces of their journey. Laura was thus able to enjoy a few minutes' respite from her sister's animadversions. She went into her bedroom and lay on a couch, hoping that Charmian wouldn't immediately discover her whereabouts. She had felt chilled by those bitter reproaches. They all seemed to believe that she must have been aware of the approach of this tremendous calamity. . . .

"Mrs. Karslake would like to see you if you please, miss." Warner's voice sounded respectfully across the silence.

"Tell her I'll come in a moment," said Laura, rousing herself with an effort. She dreaded having to listen to that renewed stream of reproachful accusations. They

seemed to touch something in her that was raw and wounded.

She found Charmian lying on her bed, exhausted by the journey and inclined to weep. Laura had already listened to her diatribes till she felt she knew them by heart. "I ought to have been told. You'd no business to hide things from me. I know she must have asked for me. You ought to have sent for me at once—it was your duty. Hugo was terribly annoyed when your second telegram came."

"You could have started directly you received the first," remonstrated Laura.

"You never said anything about there being any danger."

The thin trickle of sound tortured Laura's ears.

"I didn't know it myself—at least not till Ferrari came. If I had known, I should have sent for you. I telegraphed directly after his visit. But even he thought there was only cause for anxiety—I'm sure he never believed she was so near death."

"I can't imagine what you were thinking about! Why, she's been ill for weeks and weeks. You ought to have had a second opinion long ago. Why didn't you send for Ferrari sooner?"

"I didn't think of it—I shouldn't have known whom to send for. It was the Duke of San Salvo who suggested it. He came on Monday, and brought Ferrari here on Tuesday—and she died that night."

"And I only had your first telegram on Tuesday evening," exclaimed Mrs. Karslake indignantly. "The fact is, I suppose, you were too much taken up with this San Salvo to think of your own relations. It is the only construction I can put upon it. This man's almost a stranger to you, and yet you seem to let him arrange

everything. Even, as you told me just now, about the funeral."

"There was no one else to do it. He has been very kind," said Laura.

Charmian could always make her feel like a rebuked, humiliated child.

"Hugo is to arrive on Saturday. He will bring her will—he's one of the executors, Mr. Goldney says. We shan't know till then what her wishes were. Do you know at all how she's left her money?"

Laura shook her head. "She never told me anything—she didn't talk about her business affairs to me. Once—a little time ago—I thought she seemed rather worried about money."

"Oh, that's all nonsense—she always had heaps. You must have made a mistake. Look at the way she lived in London. That great house—six or seven servants—and the car. And all the entertaining. And your clothes, Laura—she must have spent a fortune on them this year."

"The house was nearly always let in the winter. We didn't spend much ever when we came abroad."

"Oh, I'm not at all afraid of there being any shortage. I've always expected a good bit when she died. And I'm sure she must have saved for you during these last three years, after I married and before you came out."

Still, her sister's words had affected Charmian. She wondered upon what her supposition could possibly have been based. Lady Rydal had always been extremely secretive about her affairs. She had, it is true, shown a certain reluctance to part with a large sum for Charmian's dowry, but Hugo had been rather insistent, and he had won the day after a struggle that had caused something of a coolness between him and his mother-in-law.

But perhaps therein lay a possible solution of her mother's action in regard to Rex Forde. It was one

which had always been rather inexplicable to Charmian, and Lady Rydal had declined to give any very definite reason for an interference so unusual with her. It was not her way to deny Laura anything. She had always been her favorite child, and she had often been blamed for the manner in which she had spoilt and indulged her. Perhaps it was the fear that she might be called upon to produce a sum similar to the one with which she had endowed Charmian that had made her put her foot down in that drastic manner. This certainly offered a possible solution of the problem which had secretly puzzled both sisters.

"Did you see Rex before you left?" Laura asked suddenly. She felt that at any cost she must hear news of him.

"No, but I sent him a note to say I was leaving. He was away from London staying with the Chapmans. He'll lose his billet if he doesn't look out—he's always away." She paused, eyeing Laura with a certain significant attention. "I shouldn't be surprised if they meant to catch him for that younger girl of theirs—Iris."

Laura colored faintly; she felt her heart sink; for the moment she had a dreadful fear that she was going to faint. Iris Chapman, with her exaggeratedly short skirts, her black Eton crop, her long, narrow, dark eyes with their heavy lids. Hers was almost an Eastern type of beauty, somnolent, languorous.

"She took that so coolly she must feel quite sure of him," Charmian thought. "Of course there's nothing to prevent her from marrying him now if he really wants to marry her."

Only, he hadn't seemed so fearfully keen of late. At first he had gone through a period of profound gloom, when he would go nowhere unless there was a chance of meeting Laura. But time had offered him alms for

oblivion, and he had been received with flattering eagerness by the Chapman family, whose alluring wealth had evidently dazzled him. He could see Iris as often as he liked; no obstacles had been put in his way; the girl was modern, independent, and already in possession of an allowance that amounted to an income. Charmian held the secret opinion that Rex intended to marry her. He had recovered from the snub so mercilessly administered by Lady Rydal, and throughout the winter he had been everywhere seen, at parties and dances, usually in Iris Chapman's company. Why, only last week she had seen them at the play together. Rumors of their engagement were already rife in London. But of course Laura in her seclusion at Cerva knew nothing of all that, and was probably already anticipating his speedy return to her.

Charmian had an impulse to tell her of these rumors, but upon reflection she checked it. There was no use in making her prematurely miserable, especially when she was obviously in such great grief; she would learn the truth fast enough on her return to London.

"I wonder what you'll do?" she said, gazing at Laura with a kind of scornful compassion. She was just the kind of girl, she felt, to make a most unholy mess of her life. There was something so unworldly about her—witness her reckless falling in love with a man who hardly possessed two sixpences of his own! You couldn't reason with her, she was so obstinately silent and reserved. Even now Charmian felt the impossibility of telling her she would be a fool to marry Rex, should he still wish to marry her, which was greatly open to doubt. Laura would only say she didn't care in the least about money, and that in any case she had enough for two.

"I shall give up the house and take a small flat." replied Laura, as if she had long ago considered the matter and come to a fixed decision.

"You can't possibly live alone. You are much too young and inexperienced, and then you've always been so sheltered. You had far better join forces with the aunts. You could make quite a slave of Patience if you played your cards well!"

"I don't want to make a slave of anyone. And I couldn't live with them—you must see that for yourself, Charmy. I should be miserable, and I know Aunt Sophy doesn't like me."

"They'll like your money, though. They'll be able to give up all that cheeseparing, and lose shillings instead of sixpences at bridge!"

Laura shook her head.

"I'm not going to attempt it. I prefer to live alone."

"But girls in your position don't. And, besides, I don't suppose it will be very long before you marry." She regarded her sister with a very attentive look. "When our affairs are settled, I daresay you'll find yourself quite well off. It takes a year generally—at your age that doesn't matter."

She felt now that she had skirted the subject of Rex very cleverly. She added coolly:

"I hope you won't do anything in a hurry. You ought to marry well. A rich man——"

Laura met the scrutiny squarely.

"Now this San Salvo——"

"What about him?"

"Mother thought he was taken with you before he left London. Did she know he'd turned up here?"

"Oh, yes—she knew it last Monday. The day he came."

"You might do worse than marry him," observed Charmian.

"Oh, I shouldn't dream of marrying a foreigner. He's become very Italian—very Roman—even in this short time. He's fallen completely under the old influences."

"What sort of influences?"

"Religion, for one thing. He's a very devout Catholic now. He believes everything."

There were other influences she dared not expose to Charmian's mocking scrutiny. The old grandmother, for instance, the tie of great possessions, the responsibilities he could never learn to regard lightly. She had learnt something too of his strength and sternness, his iron will, his austerity. A man to whom pleasure meant nothing at all.

Laura added slowly: "He would expect a great deal of the woman he married. He ought to choose one of his own nation and religion."

"But you like him, don't you? And he seemed particularly taken with you. And then his turning up again——"

"Oh, I like him. He's been extraordinarily kind."

"What do you think made him come to Cerva?"

"He has property here. He's staying with mother's old friend—Sir Gaspard Bligh."

"He knew you were here, though?"

"Oh, yes—I told him we should spend the winter here."

"Then you may depend upon it he came on purpose to see you. Probably he's in love with you. Really, Laura, I do hope you aren't going to be a sentimental little fool. If this man asks you to marry him do, for heaven's sake, accept him. What does his religion matter to you? I don't suppose you've given the subject two thoughts in the whole of your life. And as for his being an Italian, you must remember that his mother was English and he's lived for years and years in England. I've heard the San Salvo jewels are among the finest in Europe. You are never likely to get a better offer, and as you say you like him——"

Charmian sat up in bed, and her dark eyes flashed.

She knew that Laura intended to be tiresome and obstinate, but at least she should realize the value of the things she deliberately meant to reject.

"I'm not going to marry him, Charmy," Laura said in a very quiet tone. "Not that I really believe he means to ask me. He was sorry for me, being here all alone like this. He wanted to help me. I'm sure he knows too how unsuitable it would be."

She rose and went out of the room. Charmian's speeches jarred upon her; there was in each one the implication that she and Rex could never marry each other. Did Charmian know anything? Was she in Rex's confidence? Did she really believe in all that idle gossip about him and Iris Chapman?

But how much better to be alone, to live alone, than to marry someone you didn't care for. Not that she disliked San Salvo. She liked him very much indeed, although there was something in him that she feared. If he came to her and asked her to be his wife, she knew it would not be easy to send him away.

CHAPTER VII

I

LADY RYDAL'S will was a long and complicated document, but the clause that admitted of no misconception was the one signifying her desire to be buried with her husband in the family vault at Melthorpe, where his country house had been situated. This was definite, and all arrangements for the funeral were to be made in accordance with her wish.

Hugo Karslake, in consideration of this and of various other matters which now revealed themselves to his dismayed astonishment, relinquished the idea of joining his wife at La Cerva. On the contrary, he telegraphed to her, urging her to return as soon as possible after arranging for the coffin to be sent to England. It would be better, he added, for Laura to remain where she was for the present, as the tenancy of the villa did not expire till April, and the house in Westminster was let.

Mrs. Marley and Miss Percival fully expected that their niece would do what common courtesy demanded of her, and invite them to stay at Villa Mimosa until she should leave it herself. They hinted at the impossibility of her remaining alone there, and in a foreign country too! They were further intrigued by the daily visits of San Salvo, who seemed to be destitute of any desire to become more intimately acquainted with either of them. He managed to tolerate Charmian, but preferred to take Laura into the garden and converse with her alone on one of the upper terraces.

Laura remained deaf to their insinuations and even to the more insistent entreaties of Charmian. She wished to be alone. She needed perfect quiet. She induced San Salvo to support her and plead her cause with Charmian. He did this reluctantly, for although he longed to rid the house of so many chattering women, he still felt the inadvisability of Laura's living there for nearly two months quite alone.

Urgent telegrams from her husband prevailed upon Charmian to make plans for leaving on the following Tuesday. Mrs. Marley and Patience tearfully announced their intention of accompanying her. It was too *sad* to think of poor little motherless Laura being left alone in Italy, but she had shown them only too plainly that they weren't wanted.

"Of course she means to marry that man," Mrs. Marley informed Charmian.

"I wish I could believe she meant to do anything half so sensible, but I know she won't." Charmian had made herself hoarse, reasoning with her sister on this very point. But she had never been able to obtain the slightest reassurance from her. Laura only reiterated her intention of not marrying him.

"Hugo hints that mother's affairs are in the most frightful muddle," Mrs. Karslake informed Laura one morning shortly before her departure. "I think you'd better get rid of some of these servants. I could take Warner home with me if you liked. That would be one expense the less for you."

Although she spoke in a light, careless tone, Laura could not misconstrue the significance of the words.

"Do you mean I'm left badly off?" she asked.

"Hugo says he can't give us any idea at present. He'll let you know as soon as he can. But he wants you to be as economical as possible. One always has to retrench

after a death, what with these heavy death duties and things," added Charmian. "That's why I advise you to stay on here. You can manage quite well with a couple of servants, because you won't be entertaining or seeing anyone."

Hugo's letter had depressed her. He hinted that there was something very much amiss; they were making all kinds of dismal discoveries. Lady Rydal had run through a good deal of capital.

"I shall write when I get back and let you know exactly how you stand," continued Charmian, who was thinking all the time how wise and farseeing Hugo had been to insist upon her own portion being paid at the time of her marriage. He had somehow never had the slightest confidence in her mother's business faculties.

"Yes, you must be sure and tell me. I shall hardly spend anything while I'm here," said Laura.

"And do let me urge you not to give San Salvo a definite answer until you've heard from me."

"Why—what difference can that make?"

"Well, supposing you were left badly off—really badly off, I mean, without sufficient to live on—you might regard him very differently. You might see how necessary it was to make a provision for yourself."

Laura shivered. Little by little Charmian was demolishing her house of dreams. If she were left with very little money, there would be absolutely no possibility of her ever marrying Rex. He wanted a rich wife. But even the fact of her never being able to marry Rex wouldn't induce her to marry San Salvo. He merited a better fate than to be married for the sake of his wealth. He deserved to be loved. She could never do him such a great wrong; she cared for him too much. And, loving Rex as she did, it would be impossible for her to marry another man.

Charmian didn't understand—she had often boasted that she had never been in love.

II

It was a relief to Laura to witness the departure of the three ladies. The coffin had been taken away previously, and the house seemed strangely empty, as if some vital force had left it.

Her only distraction lay in San Salvo's daily visits. He never failed to walk over to see her every afternoon, bringing her books and papers and news of the outside world. Quite unconsciously her mind became preoccupied with him, and she felt he would always be the principal figure associated with this period of melancholy and mourning. He was indeed the only person who now occupied a prominent place in her daily life. Charmian and the aunts had stayed with her too short a time to leave any permanent impression except one of vague restlessness and agitation. They were all so anxious to advise her, to tell her what she ought to do and what without doubt her mother would have wished her to do, as if they considered themselves the infallible interpreters of Lady Rydal's posthumous wishes.

But with San Salvo she invariably recovered a certain peace. He had a way of smoothing things for her. She looked forward eagerly to his visits. She was beginning to assure herself that he wasn't in love with her; he was only very, very sorry for her. There was no love between them, only a close, rather intimate friendship, because he was associated with her great grief.

She was waiting for him in the loggia one afternoon, when she heard a car coming rapidly along the road below. It stopped at the gate. She kept her eyes fixed upon the path, and presently she saw a man's head appearing above

the bushes. But it wasn't San Salvo. It was a smaller man, and, judging by his brisk movements, a younger one. Her heart beat with sickening violence, for now she could actually see that it was Rex Forde. Her first impulse was to get up and run away and hide till she could recover something of calm and equability. But when she tried to rise, she found herself unable to move. By this time he had advanced to the steps that led up to the loggia where she was sitting.

In this moment of crisis her body had betrayed her. It was weak and trembling, as if it had received a shock. The sight of Rex had robbed her of all composure. He had only written a few lines of conventional sympathy at the time of Lady Rydal's death, and there had been no mention in the letter of any intention to visit La Cerva.

Charmian had been gone nearly a fortnight. It was possible he had seen her in London . . . she might have said something to him . . . something about San Salvo's frequent visits . . . he had always shown himself jealous of San Salvo. But subconsciously Laura knew quite well that no motive of mere jealousy had brought him thither that day. The queer thing was that his presence gave her no feeling of joy or consolation; on the contrary her whole being seemed to be possessed by a deadly apprehension of coming calamity.

She managed to rise to greet him; she put out her hand and felt it grasped by his. She hadn't a word to say as they stood there looking at each other.

"How frightfully pale you are, Laura. Have you been ill?"

"No. . . ."

"Perhaps I ought to have let you know I was coming. I arrived this morning. I went to the hotel to get some food and a wash-up."

"Did you . . . ?"

"I should have written, but I wasn't sure how you'd feel about it. So I took my chance."

"I'm very glad to see you, Rex. It was kind of you to come. You startled me at first—you see, I have so few visitors."

He was sitting opposite to her now in one of the wicker chairs. San Salvo's favorite seat—it seemed almost strange to see another man occupying it. She hoped somehow that San Salvo wouldn't come this afternoon; she didn't want the two men to meet.

"Shall you be here long?"

"No—I'm going on to Nice this evening. I'm afraid I can't even ask you to let me stay to dinner."

His tone was very reticent and non-committal; it was as if he had something to hide. She waited in silence for him to reveal the purpose of his visit.

"Laura, you and I have a great deal to say to each other. We mustn't shirk it, even if it's difficult."

As he uttered those words her sense of approaching calamity deepened; her heart seemed to sink slowly, slowly, through her body.

"I don't feel as if I had much to say to anyone just now," she answered; "all this has stunned me."

She leaned back, looking white and exhausted.

He watched her with an odd, furtive expression. "Before I left London I saw Charmian."

"Did you? I hope she was pretty well. She's only written once."

"She seemed quite well. Only—she was a little anxious about you."

"About me? But I've written to her regularly—I told her I was all right."

"Oh, not about your health. She hasn't told you—anything?"

His words were, she thought, intentionally ambiguous.

What did he mean? Why was Charmian anxious—about her?

"Please explain. You're talking in riddles," she said with a kind of irritable impatience that was a reaction from her first agitation.

"She didn't tell you anything about your mother's will?" he blurted out, almost with anger.

Laura considered the point. Yes, there had been vague hints, stray insinuations that Hugo hadn't found everything in such perfect order as they had expected. But nothing definite—nothing to cause anxiety.

Again she felt that strange sinking of the heart.

"Was there anything unusual about it?" she asked piteously.

She had sincerely believed that their reiterated incitements to economy had been actuated by a sense of its temporary necessity. But now she saw there must have been a more imperative and sinister reason for those repeated warnings.

"Do tell me!" she said, rousing herself and exhibiting something of her old courage. "I hate being kept in the dark!"

"Well, Lady Rydal has left very little indeed. She'd been living on her capital for years. Charmian was exceedingly lucky to get what she did when she did."

Sulkily, resentfully, he watched the effect of his words upon her. But she didn't change color; he wondered whether she quite understood. This doubt made him add abruptly:

"You—you've hardly enough to live on!"

"Hardly enough to live on!" she repeated, bewildered. "Oh, poor mother! That was why she felt leaving me so much. I knew there was something on her mind." Her pity and compassion went out spontaneously to the dead woman who now needed them no more. "I wish she'd

told me—she might have known I shouldn't have blamed her!"

Rex stared at her. Well, if that was the way she was going to take it——! He exclaimed roughly: "Oh, my dear, do for goodness' sake stop thinking of your mother for a moment and try to understand what it means to us!"

He couldn't accuse her now of being slow at the uptake. "Oh, I think I understand perfectly," she told him, with a bitterness she couldn't repress.

In that moment she knew that she had lost him as surely and irrevocably as if he had fallen dead before her eyes. Her first sensation was almost that of a prisoner unjustly condemned to death for the fault of another. You were caught in a trap . . . its iron teeth precluded all hope of escape. She seemed to be looking at Rex through a mist. His face grew dim and blurred, it receded from her, drifting past her. A phantom face without reality. Only real in its stupendous power to hurt her.

He was speaking in that cool, leisurely voice of his, and she tried to listen attentively although she felt as if the scene formed part of some monstrous, incredible dream.

"I can understand now why your mother insisted upon my waiting a year before I spoke to you again. She bound me by a promise—she said you were too young to think of marriage. Of course she must have seen the thing was impossible, or, perhaps with the proverbial hopefulness of the gambler, she trusted to something turning up trumps." His tone was bitter now, and his dark eyes were fixed upon her almost, as she thought, with actual animosity. "What are you going to do, Laura? There's nothing to wait for now. I'm a pauper, as you know. What's three hundred a year in these days? I doubt if you'll have more than two. And I'm never likely to get a better job. My only chance is to marry money."

Laura knew perfectly well that she would have faced

poverty, penury, and even actual hardship with Rex. She loved him, and she would have worked her fingers to the bone for him after the manner of devoted, infatuated women. But she realized now that he would never demand such a sacrifice as that, wouldn't, in fine, accept it. She wasn't in a position to give him what he so clearly asked of life. Nor was the knowledge any surprise to her. She had always been aware of his fundamental selfishness, his passion for luxury and pleasure. He would have hated poverty even with her. He seemed too to be obsessed with a kind of dread that she would hold him to his word. The thought shamed her.

"Oh, of course we mustn't wait for each other now," she said hastily. "It wouldn't be fair to you." Now that the blow had fallen with such decisive force, she could speak with perfect composure. She even felt as if she were watching a poignant, heartrending little drama that didn't concern herself at all. She was only an onlooker, deeply interested and attentive, dreadfully sorry for the girl who had just been jilted, but in no way personally involved. . . . Yet her heart was strangely bleeding, because she knew that when Rex did get up to go away it would be forever.

A kind of sick relief showed in his face that before had been so sulkily defiant.

"I was sure you'd say that, Laura. I'm glad we had the sense to keep the thing to ourselves. You'll be happier, too, knowing that you're carrying out your mother's wishes—she never wanted the marriage. You must see, too, that it isn't our fault—it's destiny—fate—providence—whatever it is that rules us."

Whatever it is that rules us. . . . With something of a shock she realized that San Salvo would have been incapable of making such a speech as that. His views on the subject were far too clear and lucid and sharply de-

fined. He didn't believe that you were ever left to blind chance. For the first time she felt the practical influence of his love. It gave her more pain than relief, but she faced the situation frankly and was constrained to envisage the difference between the man who possessed spiritual ideals and standards and the man who had none.

Rex wasn't even sorry, an omission that probed her already deep wound. It was just a piece of bad luck affecting them both. And now that she had given him back his freedom, he had nothing to fear. Of course he would have disliked any publicity in the matter, and it would have been up to her to say, if she chose, that they had been engaged and that he had thrown her over when she lost her fortune. There was no chance of that happening now. Laura had displayed her usual good sense. . . .

She knew now for certain that he didn't care for her and had probably never cared except for a mad five minutes which he now passionately regretted. Subconsciously she seemed to have been aware of the fact for many months; it had been indeed at the root of all her unhappiness up to the time of her mother's death. Love is always quick to discern the lack of love in another.

"I did try to write and explain it all to you," continued Rex, "but it looked so sordid on paper. That's why I came, and, then Charmian thought I'd better. She didn't like to write either."

"It was a long, tiresome journey to make with such a task in front of you at the end," she said, with a touch of irony. "And then perhaps you were afraid I shouldn't understand."

She bent her gaze upon him as she spoke; the look she gave him from those wonderful violet-grey eyes was, he felt, almost blinding in its intent scrutiny. Oh, she understood only too well the dreadful meanness, the pettiness,

the cowardly fears, that had prompted him to come in person on his dishonorable embassy.

"I wanted to see you again, too, please believe that," he said, deeply mortified. "We must always be friends, you know. Great friends."

Now that the danger was averted, he was thanking her by implication for the manner in which she had received his communication. She hadn't made a scene—he had been spared that. She hadn't victimized him with the tears or reproaches with which a weaker woman might have retaliated at seeing her life's happiness laid in the dust.

The deep and profound sadness of her face was unaltered. Unaltered, too, the grave subtle look of understanding and endurance.

But great friends—no, not quite that, Rex. Not. . . . friends. . . .

"I hope things will turn out better than Hugo expects," he went on, as if with an attempt to cheer her. "I hope you'll have enough to live on comfortably. But I'm sure that Charmian will see you don't need anything."

She smiled and offered: "Oh, you really mustn't trouble about that!"

"But I suppose you'll go and live with her?"

To that she vouchsafed no reply, feeling for the first time that he had forfeited all right to know anything of her petty happenings or plans for the future. He, least of all men. And Charmian too seemed to have become a shadow, far off, indeterminate. . . .

The present with its brimming bitter cup was all that so strangely mattered. The future was formless, peopled only by phantoms, with Rex missing eternally from its scenes. . . .

One by one the people who had formed the once bril-

liant galaxy that had surrounded her happy unshadowed life, were dropping out, vanishing. . . .

He was intrigued by her silence and coldness. Of course he had suffered, he now assured himself, finding nothing ambiguous in his own self-pity. It had been a wrench to come to that drastic decision, for really he had been most awfully fond of Laura Rydal. Why, but for Lady Rydal they might have been married last summer! He caught his breath, realizing the narrowness of his own escape from such a disastrous marriage.

Still, he would have liked her to show on her side some sign of regret. They had, after all, spent some wonderful moments together! Once . . . they had kissed. When he thought of that kiss now, a mist came before his eyes, blurring her pale face.

"I'm so frightfully sorry——" he said.

She benf upon him a swiftly interrogative glance, but she didn't say a word. The pain was too sharp, too overwhelming; it swept over her like an angry, impetuous flood. Her mother's death . . . and now this second loss. Just when he should have loved her the more because of her grief and great loneliness. A wild, almost lost look informed for the moment the frozen pallor of her face, but he was too deeply engrossed with his own thoughts to observe it.

"She doesn't care—she never cared," he was thinking. "I expect that plan of sending me away for a year was a put-up job between her and her mother to get rid of me. She's ambitious—she means to fly higher than that—she wants money—they all do now. She isn't Charmian's sister for nothing. Probably San Salvo——" Yes, Mrs. Karslake had informed him that San Salvo had been staying at La Cerva, adding that he had been very kind and helpful to Laura at the time of Lady Rydal's illness and death.

"In these days one simply can't marry without money," he said in a dull, morose tone, for he disliked intensely to feel that his action would leave the field clear for San Salvo. "It isn't fair to anyone, least of all to the woman. We've both been expensively brought up—we shouldn't be happy living under other conditions. But if we'd either of us had any prospects we might have risked it. Darell said something once about making me his heir, but he's only fifteen years older than I am—he may outlive me."

"Even with prospects it would have been a risk," said Laura.

She sat there very passively, her hands folded in her lap; they looked extraordinarily pale against the blackness of her dress. Like snowdrops, he thought. . . .

"Shall you remain long at Nice?" she asked suddenly.

"I don't quite know. I'm going to stay with friends who've got a villa there."

"Oh, I see." She knew, without being told, that his friends were the Chapmans. Well, there was nothing to prevent him from becoming engaged to Iris now. That was perhaps why he had come in person to break off their engagement. The one journey would suffice to accomplish both tasks. No delicate scruple would be likely to deter him from going straight to Iris when he left her. However much you might love Rex, you would never expect the finer sensibilities from him.

He rose to his feet. "I'm so glad we see eye to eye in this."

"Yes, it's much better."

"We were both a little mad last summer."

"I suppose we were."

"Good-bye, Laura."

"Good-bye." She tried to utter his name but a lump rose in her throat, choking the sound.

She gave him her hand for a second; the cold of it chilled him. That and the look she gave him, scornful, contemptuous . . . such a strange close look, full of subtle implications and avowals. It seemed to scourge him. He read in it all the accusations her lips had never spoken, all her realization of his own despicable conduct. He shrank a little before it; he didn't like that cool, impartial condemnation.

He made a poor exit, a fact of which he was humiliatingly conscious, stumbling blindly down the steps, following by some instinct the path that dipped sharply to the road. Leaving the house . . . leaving Laura . . . glad to be free and yet smarting beneath her silent criticism.

III

The sea was very calm under a sky of mother-o'-pearl. The thin line of foam where the waves broke was as white as snow and fragile as lace, creaming along the stretch of sand. The mountains dipped their fine profiles down to the water beyond the little town whose houses glittered in the wonderful afternoon light. On the breast of the sea the island of Cervalina floated purple as a pansy.

He jumped into the car and slammed the door. It was a relief to have got it over so quickly, so thoroughly, without tears or recriminations. But he might have known Laura would never in any circumstances have made a scene, and perhaps after what Charmian had let drop about San Salvo's visits, she too was relieved to be set free. Besides, it wasn't as if they'd been formally engaged; the understanding had been of the vaguest kind, known only to themselves. And after the arbitrary treatment meted out to him by Lady Rydal, it was a wonder he hadn't broken the whole thing off months ago. Rex could always put himself in the right although he knew it

wouldn't be quite easy to make Darell Hayne see things in exactly the same light. He had urged him more than once to go out to La Cerva and see if he could be of any use to Laura, a suggestion that hadn't been received very graciously. Such an action might have been completely misconstrued by the Chapmans. . . .

Rex had felt, however, that it would be more honorable to let Laura know exactly how things stood, to sever definitely the slight, informal bond which she might imagine still existed between them.

More honorable. . . .

IV

Laura crept back to her seat in the loggia, feeling mortally cold and as if strength had gone out of her. It was as if her whole world had been plunged into a confused and dreadful darkness. She groped in vain to find some familiar landmark by which to regain contact with reality, but only those words of Rex's rang in her ears with a strange, ironic, mocking iteration: *Whatever it is that rules us.* . . . But was there anything? Or was there only this nebulous darkness in which one was left to suffer blindly as the lower animals suffer until death came with kindly release?

Her mother's illness and death, her loss of fortune, Rex's callous desertion, had all descended upon her in rapid succession like a sequence of devastating blows. She was the victim of a harsh fate, and she bowed her head a little as if in submission. She wasn't going to rebel. She would just live on somehow. Blows like that didn't kill you, they only tortured and maimed, robbing life of its loveliness and peace. She was so young she might live on for another fifty or sixty years, always without Rex, who had just left her, complacently congratulating himself that

he had thus providentially and almost miraculously escaped the dire misfortune of making an impecunious marriage. . . .

Rex had gone, but his face still haunted her. It was almost a beautiful face, so dark and carven, every line clear-cut, and the eyes dark and full of fire and intelligence. But she felt that she had seen the real Rex for the first time that day. A Rex cold, cautious, mercenary, egoistic, who had deliberately slain all her lovely dreams. He had tried too to kill her love but that, alas, was a strong and vital force that lived on triumphantly in spite of all that he could do. The thought shamed her. It was terrible to love a person who didn't love you, and whose gods were money, luxury, and material things. She questioned now if he had ever loved her at all—whether he hadn't been simply attracted by the thought of her supposed fortune. Anyhow, it didn't matter. He had cut the knot with a cruel, decisive gesture. The little dream was over—it had been very charming while it lasted—for a short time it had made her very happy. But only for a short time; the cold wind of suspicion and doubt had descended upon it all too quickly. For months past the thought of Rex had brought its own peculiar torment.

The sound of footsteps aroused her, and, looking up, still confused and bewildered and feeling only half awake, she saw San Salvo standing in front of her at the bottom of the steps.

"May I come?" he said.

She rose hastily, and smoothed her hair with her hand. "Do come——"

She felt like one who had just emerged from that tortured sleep induced by an anæsthetic and during which an operation had been performed. Pain ran through her body like a fiery thing; it shamed and demoralized her, just as physical agony might have done. Her face was

white and drawn as she confronted San Salvo. He took her hand.

"Is anything the matter? You look so ill!" There was compassion in his eyes.

"Yes. Shall we go indoors and I'll tell you about it, if it won't bore you too much? I have had rather bad news this afternoon."

"I'm not disturbing you?" He was a little reluctant to intrude upon her now.

"No—no. . . . I am very glad to see you."

"You poor child," said San Salvo.

The tenderness of his voice, the pitying look he gave her, seemed to thaw the heart that Rex's cruelty had frozen. Tears gushed to her eyes.

"No—no—you mustn't pity me. You must help me to be brave."

In a moment she was calm again. San Salvo sat there in silence, waiting for her to speak. When she did speak again, her voice was cold and toneless.

"I had a visitor this afternoon—Mr. Forde. You may remember him in London—he is a cousin of Darell Hayne's."

"I remember him perfectly," said San Salvo.

"We were engaged, but my mother didn't like the idea. I think that was one of her reasons for wishing to come out here, so that we shouldn't see each other."

San Salvo's face was set like a stone mask. All its harsh and austere lines were strongly emphasized. The eyes beneath the heavy lids were sombre and seemed to hold a dull anger. So she had loved him—she had wished to marry him. There had been an actual engagement between them. He could visualize them walking away from him side by side in that great London house where he had first met Laura Rydal.

"He came to-day to tell me that marriage between us

would be quite impossible. Hugo says I'm left very badly off—I shall hardly have enough to live upon. It's difficult to realize——"

She broke off, aware that he was looking at her in dismayed surprise. He was thinking of Lady Rydal's spacious, luxurious London house. It had borne all the evidences of long-established wealth.

"Luckily I'm young, and if necessary I can work. I shall go home now as soon as I can. Do you think Sir Gaspard would know of anyone who would take this villa off my hands for two months? I feel that it's too expensive for me now."

"I know of a tenant who would take it at once. He would want it as soon as you could find it convenient to move."

"Oh, do you really? That would be an enormous help. You see, I feel as if I'd been in an earthquake—everything broken and ruined and all the landmarks gone. I've even thought how wonderful it must be to be a Catholic and to know for certain that everything is sent to you by a Divine Providence—not by a malicious fate that mocks at your sufferings."

Fate—destiny—providence—whatever it is that rules us. Uttered by Rex's soft casual voice with its intonation of careless culture, those words had seemed pregnant with sinister implications of unbelief. She hoped San Salvo might say something that would counteract the impression they had made upon her.

"Yes—we have that certainty," he said quietly. "Our Blessed Lord is most near to us when we are suffering. That's why some of the saints have prayed for suffering—it is part of His scheme for our salvation . . . we must accept it . . . rejoice at it . . . for in this at least we can follow Him. . . ."

"I've lost so much," she said. "My mother—Rex—nearly all my money. I feel—stripped——"

He thought she looked very calm and brave amid this accumulation of calamity; there was no sign in her face of any interior mutiny. But she was groping too—she seemed to appeal to him to help her, for the simple reason that he was a Catholic.

To-day she had treated him as an intimate friend; she had spoken frankly for the first time of Rex Forde. He could not suppress a certain relief at the thought that this man had gone out of her life forever. His own doing and choice—an incredible thing! To win her love and then cast it aside at the first breath of adversity. But in the end she would surely see how great an escape she had had.

"Miss Rydal, would you like to come out for a little run in my car?"

"Yes——I should like it very much. I haven't been out to-day except in the garden. And Rex's visit has upset me. He hadn't been gone very long when you came. If you'd come a little earlier you would have seen him."

"Thank you, but I don't in the least wish to see him," he answered with a touch of hauteur that astonished her. "I know it sounds a cruel thing to say to you when you are so unhappy, and perhaps you'll think I've no right to say it. But I'm very glad that you're not going to marry him. He is quite unworthy of you. Your mother was perfectly justified in trying to put a stop to it. You're very young, and you ought to make a far better marriage than that."

"I was very fond of him," she said. It seemed strange even to herself to speak of her love for him thus in the past tense, as if it too had perished in that tremendous cataclysm.

"Don't think of him!" he burst out, almost as if the words had escaped involuntarily from him. "He isn't

worth one of your thoughts—one of your tears—still less, anything of your love! I've heard of him from Hayne—he was afraid that you might be learning to care for him."

She was silent, a little taken aback by the outburst. She had never seen him so moved before. It was as if he cherished an instinctive dislike to this man who had won her love.

At last she said quietly: "I did love him, from the first moment I saw him. He has such a beautiful face, hasn't he? And he said that he loved me." She made the confession quite simply. That love of hers, with its young, fresh, enthusiastic quality, had colored all her thoughts, had woven itself into the very texture of her life. Now that Rex had shown her that it no longer existed for him, she felt utterly alone and adrift, a derelict without anchorage. But it was rather a comfort to speak thus frankly to San Salvo. He was so absolutely and consolingly on her side. It was evidently a relief to him that the affair had come to an end. His few glimpses of Rex had not prepossessed him in his favor.

"You see, I thought we should have been married quite soon," she continued, "although I couldn't bear to think it was my mother's death that had made the marriage possible. But Rex is quite right—he'd be simply miserable if he were very poor. He must marry a rich wife. I think it'll be Iris Chapman—he danced with her a great deal that night at Lady Symes's. I'm nearly sure he's gone to Nice to stay with them now."

She pictured him arriving there, gay with relief at his so easily regained freedom. She was glad to think she hadn't put out a finger to detain him, to hold him back. She had been so quiet, he could surely never have guessed how much he was hurting her.

"He's a man utterly without ideals!" exclaimed San Salvo almost violently; "he only cares for money and the

things that money can buy. If you'd married him, you would have been perfectly wretched. Shall we start now?"

She went into the house and presently returned wearing a fur coat and a little black felt hat. This sombre attire emphasized her radiant fairness. They walked down to the gate and entered the car that was standing in the road below.

V

Soon they had reached the gay little streets of La Cerva, thronged with visitors on that glorious afternoon of early spring. To Laura's surprise the car stopped in front of a church. Why was he taking her thither? She alighted, however, and followed him into the building, wondering a little and conscious of a vague excitement.

He dipped his hand into the holy-water stoup, and crossed himself, genuflecting towards the tabernacle as he did so. Laura watched these actions with a close attention. She had never been inside a church with him before, and it seemed to her that she was obtaining a glimpse of another San Salvo. When he knelt down she followed his example.

Curtains of cloth-of-gold hung over the tabernacle doors. A red lamp gleamed like a jewel in the dusk of the church. There were statues of Our Lady and the Sacred Heart, modern productions of no artistic value, and one or two beautiful old pictures.

The peace of the place stole insensibly over her, and she yielded herself to it. It resembled the well-being that follows the cessation of a very acute pain. You were lapped in a kind of a glorified ease. Nothing seemed to matter.

Laura tried to pray, but no words came. If one really believed in the mystical doctrine of the Divine Presence one would naturally, she thought, come hither to be solaced

and healed. One would touch as it were the Garment's Hem. And even if one didn't quite believe—she couldn't tell at that moment what she believed or what she didn't —one was in some extraordinary way comforted and consoled.

She glanced at San Salvo. His profile, harsh, austere, finely-drawn, was raised a little; his eyes were gazing intently towards the Tabernacle. He made her feel almost like an intruder. There was something intimate in his attitude, as if he were in the habit of seeking counsel and guidance by this silent colloquy. Mystics had often possessed that gift of intimacy, so that for them the dividing veils had been a little drawn aside, and faith merged into something that almost resembled sight.

She envied him at that moment, realizing how little temporal things could touch or affect him. He seemed to be on a different plane. Since his return to Italy, he had yielded himself to the old spiritual influences. He was different; he seemed much wiser, more coldly controlled.

He rose at last and they left the church together. When they were once more out in the broad, sunny piazza she looked up at him and smiled.

"How I envy you," she said simply.

"You felt something?" he inquired, fixing his eyes on her face.

"Yes. It seemed to heal me. I felt . . . happier. More at peace."

"Perhaps when you're in London you'll go sometimes into a Catholic church to pray. Do you know the Oratory at all? I'm sure you could find time to go there."

"I'll try to, but I'm not sure now that I believe in anything at all."

He looked at her with kindling eyes.

"I was praying for you then," he said. "I prayed that you might have the gift of faith. Some day perhaps——."

She did not answer. They entered the car and drove back to the Villa Mimosa. Laura was unresisting in his hands. She was glad to think that she had been quite frank in telling him about her affair with Rex. They would always be friends, and now he would never wish to marry her, because he knew that her love was given to this man whom he so disliked and despised.

Afterwards, when he had left her and she was alone in her own room, the reaction came and she burst into a fit of stormy weeping. Rex was in the train, drawing nearer and nearer to Nice. She was certain that he was going to Iris Chapman. Not only did he not love her any more, but he loved another woman. It hadn't hurt him to go way and leave her forever. Perhaps he felt only an immeasurable relief.

Never in his life had he probably uttered a single prayer for her. But San Salvo had prayed for her, and the thought of this suddenly quieted her. He had helped her wonderfully over the first two intolerable hours that followed upon Rex's departure.

She must always be grateful to him for that.

CHAPTER VIII

I

LAURA found it more difficult to leave La Cerva than she had anticipated, for, though she had suffered great griefs there, the place had brought her an undoubted peace, and it would at least always hold for her the remembrance of San Salvo's devoted friendship. She felt that she would miss it when she returned to London, to start life on a different footing and perhaps quite alone. Here at least she had tranquillity, the eternal beauty of the blue sea and the violet mountains, the sunshine and flowers that made such brilliant patterns upon the olive-clad hill-sides. On the morning of her departure she rose early and, looking out of the window, saw Corsica lying like some fairy island floating upon the breast of the sea, pale as a cloud and scarcely more substantial than a cloud. Sky and water were alike golden, as if they had been dipped into some ethereal fluid. Corsica had seldom been so clearly visible before, and it looked almost as if it had arisen from some watery fastness in the night, a fabled Atlantis arising from its long sojourn in the depths of the sea, fresh and sparkling and lifting mist-colored peaks against that wonderful golden sky.

San Salvo assured her that the villa was sublet and that there had been no difficulty at all in getting rid of the remainder of the lease. Although he did not tell her so he had himself resolved to be its new tenant, for his business

at La Cerva was not yet finished, and he felt that he had already trespassed too long upon Sir Gaspard's hospitality.

Laura accepted his statement without any doubt as to its strict veracity. Despite her reluctance to return to England, she felt there would be no use in postponing the evil day. She must begin to take up the threads and make definite plans for the future. The prospect seemed a little grim and forbidding, now that she had lost both her mother and Rex. She felt strangely forlorn and bereft as she stood there in the loggia on the morning of her departure, waiting for San Salvo to fetch her and drive her to the station.

"I'm so sorry to go away," she told him, as the car sped down the hill. "I feel I might have been so very happy in Italy. One never expects somehow that everything will go wrong——"

"Perhaps not so wrong as you believe now. I hope some day you will come back to Italy, and that you'll be very happy here: happier than you've ever been."

There was no mistaking the warmth of his tone. It was too soon to speak to her of his love, but at least she must know that in the future she would have the opportunity of returning under far brighter auspices. If it had been possible, he would never have let her go now; he would have urged her to remain. But it was Rex's visit that had shown him how useless it would be to make any premature proposals for her future. His faithlessness had wounded her too deeply, and at a moment when she had already been most cruelly hurt.

She looked very pale and rather ill that morning in her dull black clothes. She had lost something of that wonderful radiance. But in his eyes she was still surpassingly beautiful. He knew that he loved her and that he could never dream of marrying another woman. And, looking

back, he believed he had given her her first lesson in the faith. Even those few minutes spent side by side before the Blessed Sacrament had drawn them a little nearer to each other. He had prayed for her then with a kind of passion, believing that some day when her wound was healed she would be his wife.

"Shall you come to London again, do you think?" she asked, as they stood on the platform waiting for the train.

"I hope to come this summer," he answered. "You must write to me, won't you, and tell me where you are and what you're doing? I shall look forward to those letters."

"Yes, I'll write," she said. "I shall be with Charmian at first, you know, until I can find some place of my own."

"Do stay with your sister as long as you can," he urged.

She smiled. "I'll stay as long as she'll keep me. They hate having people with them, you know."

San Salvo looked steadily at her for a moment, then he said:

"May I come soon?"

"Oh, whenever you like," she answered carelessly. Now that he knew of her love for Rex, he must surely have renounced all desire to marry her. But it would be very pleasant to see him again. If there were difficult things to do she could count upon his help. He made her feel that she did possess at least one loyal and devoted friend. The train rushed into the station. Laura ascended the steep steps into the carriage. San Salvo followed her. For a moment they were alone, and he raised her ungloved hand to his lips.

"If you should ever want any help—the help that a friend can give—will you send for me?" he said.

"Yes," said Laura.

II

"Of course we can't keep her forever," Charmian told her husband on the evening of Laura's arrival. Even she could not help noticing how pale and tired and exhausted Laura looked. She had travelled straight through, and the long night journey had fatigued her.

"Besides, it wouldn't be fair to her," Charmian added.

"Fair?" Hugo repeated the word as if he had not quite understood. Really, for a clever man he was extraordinarily obtuse at times.

"I mean she must begin to learn to live more simply as soon as possible. As long as she's with us she won't realize in the least how terribly hard-up she is!"

"Is it necessary for her to realize it, poor little thing?" Hugo felt sorry for his little sister-in-law. She had been horribly let down by that bounder, Rex Forde, and he would have been glad to give her a home for many weeks. Delightful, decorative creature! . . .

"Of course it is. It's never any kindness to put people into false positions," said Charmian in her crisp, decisive tones.

"Laura isn't a fool. I bet she realizes it all to a tick without our rubbing it in," he announced.

"Well, I do hope you won't encourage her to remain more than the stipulated three weeks. The aunts will be only too delighted to have her—she can always go to them."

Charmian had sounded the aunts and discovered that they actually welcomed the idea of having Laura to live with them. Even if she were badly off, and really there seemed no doubt about that since darling Phyllis had proved so sadly incapable of managing her affairs, every little helped, and it scarcely cost more to feed three people than two. Mrs. Marley did not reveal the fact that she

had dropped a good deal over bridge of late; she was a careless, indifferent player. Naturally Charmian was not informed of this, nor of the straitened circumstances in which the sisters now found themselves without the constant support of Lady Rydal's little presents.

Laura went to bed shortly after her arrival. The Channel had proved in an evil mood, and this, combined with fatigue and sorrow, had made her feel positively ill. When she left the villa she had had the feeling that she was closing down an important, poignant chapter of her life. The knowledge that she was now living on her sister's charity emphasized her sense of homelessness and loneliness. She wished it had been possible for her to remain at the villa until the end of her tenancy. She had never felt so violently unhappy there as she did here in Charmian's luxurious house.

Her mind was very active as she lay there in her little room almost at the top of the high London house. She was alone, and she resolved that as soon as possible she would settle down somewhere and make a home for herself. She must know first exactly how much money she was likely to have, and try to live scrupulously within the limits of that income. But she would live alone. She couldn't face life with the aunts, who seemed so surprisingly eager to have her, nor with Charmian, who, she knew, didn't want her at all. Perhaps she would take a cottage in the country. London was so expensive, and in London there was always the dreadful chance of encountering Rex. Besides, she wanted to separate herself completely from that old milieu. She seemed to be the sole survivor of some gigantic catacylsm, a terrific earthquake that had swept away all familiar scenes and landmarks, and safe sheltering places. It needed all her courage to face that new life, bereft forever of the two people she had held most dear.

Charmian had greeted her with more than usual affection. She was secretly shocked at Laura's appearance. She had changed so much; she wasn't even looking so very pretty. She must have suffered horribly, physically as well as mentally.

"I expect you're awfully tired; you'd better have your dinner in bed," said Charmian.

"Yes, I should like that. But I want very little of anything——"

Some hot tea was brought to her bedside; she drank it eagerly and it brought a semblance of color to her face.

Charmian sat there watching her.

"Pretty rotten about the money, isn't it?" she remarked. "I'm thankful I had my portion when I married. Still, I'd always hoped there'd be more. It's awful for you, Laura, but fortunately you'll be able to live quite cheaply with the aunts and then you won't have the expense of furnishing. You know everything has got to be sold."

"Has it?"

"There's lots of room for you in that little house—it won't cost you much to live with them."

"I can't make any plans now, please, Charmy. I'm much too tired."

"Aunt Sophy is coming round to see you in the morning—she'll talk over ways and means with you," said Charmian with determined cheerfulness. Why, Laura ought to be thankful that there was a perch awaiting her. She might have found herself completely stranded! "That little room at the top will do capitally for you—I shouldn't at all mind sleeping there myself. We shall sell all the furniture directly the tenants leave—that'll be in about two months. Hugo said it was so much better. Then we can get rid of the lease of the house. . . . Laura, do eat something."

"I'm not hungry, thanks, Charmy. I feel shaken to bits. Give me another cup of tea, please."

Charmian watched her as she drank it.

"You know, I was frightfully sorry for you about Rex, old thing—it was awfully hard luck on you. Still, he did the wisest possible thing in the circumstances. You did see that, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"He's at Nice now, with the Chapmans," Charmian announced carelessly. But all the time her shrewd dark eyes scrutinized Laura with a curiosity that was almost fierce.

"Is he?"

Laura felt again that dreadful sinking of the heart that seemed as if it must culminate in actual unconsciousness. The body was simply the pawn of the soul. It suffered with the soul's sufferings, emphasizing them. It grew weak and failed, just when you had need of all its strength to carry you through. She wondered if she would ever, ever be able to hear Rex's name without this sense of dark interior anguish.

"What did he say to you?"

"Charmy, I'd really rather not talk about it. Aren't you satisfied just to know that everything is at an end? We weren't formally engaged, thank goodness; there'll be no need to announce it in the papers."

"I'm glad she can look at it so sensibly," thought Charmian. "Of course it would have been dreadful if she'd kept him to his word. He would have been miserable with a penniless wife." Yet something in Laura's manner puzzled her. She was quite cold and quiet about the matter, yet she refused to discuss it. She would vouchsafe no details about what must really have been a rather dramatic interview. She had seen Rex, and her engagement was at an end. That was all. Charmian wondered

whether she knew that rumor already affianced him to Iris Chapman.

Laura lay there, very still and quiescent, but feeling deadly cold and rather sick. So he was really at Nice with the Chapmans. . . . He must have gone straight from her to Iris, relieved and thankful to have effected his escape so cheaply.

"I must look this in the face—I mustn't shirk it," she thought, trying to strengthen herself. But she couldn't think of Rex. It was like watching the slow, difficult dying of something very dearly loved.

III

Afterwards Laura remembered little of those first nightmare days in London. She was quite ill enough to have an adequate excuse for staying in bed. Charmian was kind, and always ran in to see her in the intervals between her ceaseless engagements. She was fond of saying that she wasn't going anywhere just now on account of her deep mourning, yet she seemed to be occupied from morning to night, rushing here and there, shopping, lunching and dining with her friends, and motoring into the country whenever she felt at all dull or had a few hours to spare. Sometimes for days she would have no meals at home.

Sophia Marley and Patience called at least twice a week to see Laura. They hinted more than once that perhaps when she was better she would come and pay them a little visit to see how she liked it. They were so certain that darling Phyllis would have wished her to go and live with them. She was too young to face the world alone! But Laura lay there, white and smiling, her short bright hair enclosed in a net of pale blue silk. She said very little, for she didn't want to hurt their feelings, poor dears,

by revealing her unalterable determination to leave London as soon as possible.

Rex could never stay away for very long; he would surely soon be returning to England. And at all costs she must avoid a meeting.

Sometimes she even thought of leaving England altogether and returning to live at La Cerva. The little place, bathed in the golden Italian sunshine, allured her; she longed to be away from the clamor of traffic, the sound of telephone bells. Charmian's house seemed like a pandemonium. She needed quiet and silence.

"I don't believe she has felt darling Phyllis's death in the least," Mrs. Marley announced as they left the house one afternoon after a singularly unsatisfactory interview with Laura.

"She never shows her feelings," murmured Patience, whose heart had gone out to her lonely little niece as never before.

"She hasn't got any." Mrs. Marley's tone was trenchant and decisive. "The only thing she minds is finding herself practically penniless."

They walked on a few paces in silence.

"She won't be able to dress like that any more! Why, she must have spent as much on her clothes as she's got to live on now!"

"I'm afraid it will be dreadfully difficult for her. Dear Phyllis was so indulgent. Perhaps it would have been kinder if she'd given her *some* hint as to how matters stood."

"It wouldn't have been of the slightest use," replied Mrs. Marley firmly. "Laura was always selfishly extravagant, and it's only just that she should pay for it now. I really begin to think Charmian has the better disposition of the two, but they are both Rydals to the core."

"It's such a pity dear Phyllis didn't bring her up to

some profession. So many things are open to girls in these days, and I've always thought Laura would look charming as a barrister! And she's clever too—she won lots of prizes at school."

"Phyllis counted too much upon her making a brilliant marriage. But there was never anyone but that dreadful Rex Forde, and you see he chucked her directly he found out about the money."

"Phyllis never wished for that marriage. She did her best to get rid of him. Of course I thought they would get married at once—when she died. . . ."

"He was far too shrewd for that. Charmian says he's practically engaged to a Miss Chapman."

"I'm dreadfully sorry for poor little Laura. I'm certain she was in love with him. I did so hope she would be able to marry him!"

"Really, Patience, for a woman of forty-eight you are singularly sentimental," said Mrs. Marley contemptuously. "No one can marry on nothing a year in these days of exorbitant prices. Even Laura must see that."

She had never really liked Rex, with his cool, arrogant, supercilious manner. If he had really intended to marry Laura, he would surely have been more civil to her near relations. Why, he had never even called upon her mother's sisters!

They had reached the narrow, rather charming, little house in a quiet Chelsea square. Patience opened the door with her latch-key and they entered the passage that served as hall.

"I can't imagine Laura here, can you?" she said, a trifle deprecatingly.

"She must cut her coat according to her cloth," replied Mrs. Marley briskly. "We shall have to be very firm and not permit any nonsense. No unnecessary waiting on!"

As they mounted the stairs, Patience said:

"I was thinking of giving up my room to her—it's larger. And I don't mind the attic in the least. One gets more light and fresh air higher up."

Mrs. Marley paused and gazed at her sister incredulously.

"My dear Patience, you must be a perfect fool to suggest such a thing. If you begin to make sacrifices for her, we shall never have a moment's peace. She must be taught that this is our house and she can't do what she likes in it!"

Patience with her incurable tendency to sentimentalism, could, however, only think of Laura as she had seen her that day, lying in that small but luxurious bedroom looking like a pale, spent flower. She had lost the one person who had loved and indulged her, and she seemed to Patience quite pathetically alone. How she would miss that unfailing love and indulgence and solicitude! At nineteen a girl needed her mother more perhaps than at any other age, and the bond between those two had been a singularly close and intimate one. It had survived quite astonishingly Lady Rydal's high-handed action in regard to Rex Forde. Laura had submitted with acquiescence, and with no sign of rebellion. Such an action would certainly have made a breach between most parents and children, but here the waters had scarcely stirred. Patience, who realized quite painfully all that Laura had so recently endured in the way of loss and suffering, felt an almost maternal tenderness towards her. She longed to spoil her, to feed her up, to make the harsh way as smooth as she could. But she listened to her sister's more bracing counsels without attempting to dispute them, for she rarely ventured to disagree openly with her.

"Somehow I felt sorry for Laura to-day, poor little

thing," she said as she opened her bedroom door. "I'm sure she must have suffered very much."

She went into her room and closed the door.

It was a dreadful thought, but somehow she couldn't help blaming Phyllis. If anyone had been selfish it was Phyllis, and not poor little Laura, who now had to bear the whole brunt of her mother's reckless squandering and extravagance.

"I hope the poor child will never come here," she reflected. "I'm sure she would be miserable, and Sophy would always be putting her in her place. She doesn't realize how unkind she can be—she thinks that sort of thing is good for people. I do wish some rich man would marry Laura. I suppose she never saw that Italian duke again. He would have been the very person if only she could learn to forget Rex Forde a little."

She took off her hat and sat down for a moment, scanning her face before the mirror. Patience had never been pretty, but she had a softness and charm that were rather pleasing. Her eyes were very blue and her mouse-colored hair would have been attractive if she had learned to "do" it properly. She had never looked young and now she looked less than her age, for she had the slight figure of a girl. If she had married, her character would probably have developed in strength, but she had lived for years so completely under her sister's stern, hectoring rule that she had lost all the initiative she had ever possessed. Although she was the eldest of the three, she simply didn't count. No one asked her opinion or took her timidly proffered advice. She realized this, and she didn't want Laura to endure a similar fate. She was too young and pretty to be crushed by Sophia, who seemed to think that if a woman had never been married she must be destitute alike of brains or experience.

IV

When she was well enough, Laura consulted various house-agents to inquire if they had any small country cottages on their books. A real cottage, not a bungalow. . . . But she soon discovered that many had been before her in the search—people who wanted a little place in the country or near the sea to which they could run down for the week-end. The quieter the better. In most cases they motored down to it, so that its distance from a station didn't trouble them. Yes, there had been a run on cottages, and the term, as Laura found, was a singularly comprehensive one; some of them indeed possessed as many as eight bedrooms.

She came away a little disheartened. Every place seemed to be too expensive for her. Indeed, where the freehold had been purchased and the house thoroughly renovated and modernized, perhaps in accordance with some rich man's whim, these cottages had in many cases been resold for far higher prices.

Hugo had told her in a melancholy tone that she mustn't count on having more than two hundred and fifty pounds a year. That didn't go far in these days, still a good many people surely contrived to make it do. The great thing seemed to be to keep your rent at as low a figure as possible. And then in the heart of the country she wouldn't want any new clothes for ages. She hoped she would be able to afford a maid, for she knew little of the domestic arts of cooking and sewing. Still, she supposed it wasn't yet too late for her to take lessons in those highly necessary accomplishments. Only, one couldn't really live absolutely alone without a maid or any sort of companion in the depths of the country where cottages could still be had more or less cheaply and where one wouldn't want many new clothes. The whole problem became more and

more difficult, and sometimes she wondered whether it wouldn't be better to follow the line of least resistance and join forces with the aunts. She went to visit them one day, almost resolving to make the offer quite timidly and humbly, but the odors of stale cooking that she encountered in the narrow hall sapped her courage and she left without ever mentioning the matter.

There must be some place for her in the world, if she could only find it.

In despair she wrote to Darell Hayne, imploring his help. He had been suffering a good deal with his leg of late; there had been talk of his undergoing another operation; still he managed to hobble into a taxi and drive round to Charmian's house. Laura saw him in the little dark study, which was on the ground floor at the back of the dining-room.

"Dear Darell," she said, "I suppose I'm a most awful fool but I really don't know what to do. They're all at me to go and live with the aunts, and I know I should simply hate it! I shouldn't mind Patience, but really aunt Sophy frightens me. She snubs me so. I want to find a pretty cottage in a nice village where there's a green and a pond like the one in *Jackanapes,* and where I can live alone without being scared to death at night."

"Oh, my dear child, you really can't do anything of the sort!" he exclaimed in a tone of half mock, half very real dismay.

"Why not?"

"I could give you a dozen reasons, if you insist. But the principal one is that you're much, much too young."

"Lots of girls of nineteen live alone, Darell."

"Yes, but they're not like you."

"Would you prefer me to stay in London and look for a job? I should hate it, you know, and I'm so incompe-

tent, no one would keep me in any capacity for more than a week."

She looked very fragile, he thought, in her black dress made so simply it was almost like a nun's garment. But her beauty had never seemed so great, and he was seized with an inconsequent wish that San Salvo could see her now.

"I shall go mad if I have to live with the aunts!" she exclaimed, with a show of spirit that delighted him. So the old Laura wasn't quite dead, nor yet quite crushed.

"Why on earth doesn't Charmian keep you here?"

She made a little grimace.

"She says it's on Hugo's account, but he's such a dear I know he'd be only too willing to let me stay. Charmy never could bear anyone quite near the throne, you know."

So there was really no place for her. He felt a dull, insensate anger rising in his heart; it was directed chiefly against Rex—Rex who had so coolly and callously deserted her just when her need of him was greatest.

"The young swine," he thought.

"Well, I'll think it over. By the way, do you know yet what you've got?"

"No, but Hugo says I mustn't spend more than two hundred and fifty a year. There may be a little more when the things have been sold. Mother left everything to me."

He considered the position ruefully. It would have been riches, of course, to a girl accustomed to being on her own and able to fend for herself. But to Laura, brought up in idle luxury, it was penury. Like Patience, he was inclined to blame Lady Rydal for her short-sightedness.

During the pause that followed, Laura rose and stood looking out of the window, at the small paved garden

with a few smoke-blackened shrubs that offered an uninspiring prospect.

"Have you heard from Rex?" she asked suddenly.

It was really in order to hear news of Rex that she had asked Darell to come and see her. The other reason had only been a subterfuge with which momentarily she had been able to deceive herself. She hadn't really wanted to ask Darell's advice—her position was so hopeless that she felt no one could possibly help her. But all these weeks she had longed and longed to hear some word of Rex. Faithless as he was, she still loved him, and sometimes she tried to believe that he loved her too.

"He came back a couple of days ago." Darell fixed his melancholy eyes upon her. Yes, she had better learn the truth even if she should hate him as the bearer of ill news. "He's engaged to Iris Chapman."

"Already?" The word escaped her almost like a sigh, she uttered it so breathlessly. But she gave no other sign of emotion. Her fingers mechanically played a tune on the wooden ledge of the window.

"They are to be married in June," said Darell.

The world was rocking and spinning about her. She didn't feel anything except that somewhere there had been a dreadful disaster and that she was somehow involved in it. In June—but of course they had nothing to wait for. Mr. Chapman could give his daughter as much money as she wanted. . . .

"You knew we were engaged?" said Laura, still drumming with her fingers as if beating out some mad melody.

"I was afraid, from something your mother once told me, that you were," he answered.

"He came over to La Cerva, before he went to Nice, on purpose to break it off. He'd heard, you see, about mother's will. It was very wise of him, wasn't it?"

"If you like to call it wise."

She was silent.

"Do help me to go and live in the country, Darell," she said presently. "I simply can't and won't stay in London. You do see it would be impossible for me, don't you?"

"I think for the present you would be happier somewhere away from London."

"Then you'll help me?"

"Yes. I'll do my best. You're splendid, Laura. I do admire your wonderful courage!"

"I'm not really brave. I'm suffering horribly. I want to die!"

She flung the words at him, almost with passion.

"Oh, don't give Rex that satisfaction! He isn't worth it—he isn't worth anything at all, really. He's a rotter, my dear. Even for your sake I'm glad you can never marry him."

"I love him so." Her lip trembled.

"I know you do. I wish you had never seen him."

"I don't even wish that. I should have missed so much."

"And you would have been spared so much."

She came back and sat near him, her face pale and frozen.

"You're a great comfort to me, Darell. I think you're even kinder than San Salvo."

"Ah, San Salvo!" he repeated with simulated carelessness. "I suppose you came across him at Cerva?"

"Yes. Didn't Charmy tell you? He was so kind to me during mother's illness and afterwards. I saw him very often."

"That would have been the man for you, Laura," he told her.

"Perhaps . . . if I hadn't seen Rex. That made it seem quite impossible."

"But not always," he assured her. "I mean you can't go through life alone just because that young blighter

chooses to marry another woman. No, Laura, you've got to make the best of it. One *can* love again, you know, even if it isn't quite the same love."

"Can one? I suppose one can get over anything. But not all at once, Darell, you must give me a little time, you know." She smiled rather bitterly. There was to her something almost indecent in his suggestion that she should marry San Salvo just when he had heard her confess her love for Rex.

"San Salvo has a great deal to give you—" he said.

"The Castle of Otranto?" There was something faintly ironical in her tone.

"That, and a lot besides."

"He tried very hard to convert me," she admitted.

"Well, he might do worse things."

"He's changed since he went to live in Italy. He's much more Italian now. And he's a very fervent, pious Catholic."

"He's reacted, just as I expected."

"It seems to make him older—sterner. I think he would make heavy demands upon the woman he married."

"I'm sure he would. But you must have the sense to see that he's a man in a thousand even without the accident of his great possessions. Don't send him away, Laura, for any idle, frivolous reason."

His words were, oddly enough, almost a repetition of Sir Gaspard's.

"He's never likely to come." But even to her own ears her words lacked sincerity. She knew that some day he would come, and that whether she liked it or not she would have to listen to him and give him a plain answer.

Darell was in despair. In this mood she would probably refuse him. Couldn't she see that he was worth twenty Rexes? He longed to shake her. Grief seemed to have shortened and obscured her vision.

He rose and limped towards the door. Laura accompanied him into the hall.

"Don't forget to see about that cottage, Darell," she said. "I'm sure you might hear of one through your friends. I shouldn't mind a lodge—I could open the gate when you came there on a visit and drop you a little curtsy!" She suited the action to the word and made a demure obeisance.

He laughed in spite of himself.

"I'll do my best. And you must learn wisdom as well as courage. Good-bye." He held out his hand.

Laura clasped it in both hers.

"Good-bye, dear Darell. But you mustn't lecture me too much."

The words won a smile from him.

"She'll get over this business," he thought, as he hobbled away. "And then perhaps she'll think of San Salvo. Anyhow, I mean to send for him. He's just as likely to succeed now as at any other time. She's beginning to realize how difficult everything is going to be."

He sent a telegram to San Salvo that same evening.

CHAPTER IX

I

THE three weeks' visit to Charmian had almost come to an end, and still Laura had been unable to find anything cheap enough to suit her narrow income. Her only alternative was to go to the aunts for a short time since Charmian had not invited her to prolong her stay with her. This omission had been rather a disappointment to her—she felt that in another week or two her searches might have resulted in success. Darell had not given her any substantial assistance in the matter, but then he was suffering so much from his leg that he could hardly leave the house. Nevertheless she was a little hurt that he had never been to see her, nor had he invited her to go and see him.

The third week was nearly over when she received a letter from San Salvo, informing her that he had arrived in London and would call upon her on the following day. It astonished her, for she believed him to be still in Italy, nor had he given her any reason to suppose that he intended to return to London so soon. For him England belonged to the past. Although it was his mother's country, he had always felt something of an alien there, even if he could look back upon his sojourn with something of satisfaction as a period of hard work and strenuous endeavor, interspersed with a certain amount of gaiety and one or two charming friendships. It had helped to form him, and had emphasized something within him that was of

purely English quality and which probably he would never entirely lose.

She hadn't, of course, imagined that he would come so soon, even if he had really intended to come at all. Why, it was not yet a month since she had quitted La Cerva. And she knew that he had a great deal to do in Italy. He was not the kind of man to neglect anything of his duty. He had confronted the new tasks and obligations with characteristic energy. His dynamic personality could never permit him to devolve into a merely idle man, contented to enjoy his great wealth in the pursuit of pleasure.

Hugo had gone to the City and Laura sought Charmian in her own sitting-room, a very perfect and luxurious little apartment leading out of her bedroom.

Charmian listened to the announcement of San Salvo's arrival in London with praiseworthy indifference and a lack of astonishment that surprised her sister.

"Of course you must see him, Laura dear," she said sweetly. "You do want to, don't you?"

So San Salvo really meant to try his luck, and much sooner too than she had dared to hope. As far as she could see, he had arrived at a critical moment when Laura was feeling a little disheartened about her future. Secretly she hoped that the girl intended to behave reasonably. She had developed very rapidly during the past few months. She wasn't a child any more. She had a will of her own. She was a cruelly disillusioned woman too, and that was all in San Salvo's favor.

Of course there were things against it, but so there were in most contemplated marriages, if you came to that. Questions of religion and age and means or want of means nearly always cropped up in any proposed union. Religion . . . Laura had never troubled her head about that; it wasn't an insuperable obstacle with her as it would have been with many women. Nationality . . . a graver bar-

rier in Charmian's opinion, but then San Salvo was English on his mother's side, which made a great difference. He was thoroughly conversant with the English language and spoke it fluently; he was acquainted with English customs. They would live for the most part in Rome, which was one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world, possessing too a fairly large English colony, among whom Laura would certainly make friends. The objections to the marriage all seemed to Charmian quite negligible, and she herself was entirely in favor of it. Besides, it would provide a wonderful solution of a very difficult problem. This idea of Laura's, of living alone in a country cottage with or without a maid, was pure madness. It was a mercy San Salvo had reappeared so soon.

"She must have given him some encouragement," thought Charmian.

"I don't really mind if he comes or not," said Laura languidly, "but he was very friendly and kind at Cerva, and I shall be glad to see him."

She could perfectly divine the trend of Charmian's thoughts. And their orientation was both natural and accurate, since Laura herself knew that San Salvo could have but the one objective in coming to London just then, at a time indeed which must have been highly inconvenient to himself, involving a drastic change of plans, and that was to seek her out and ask her to be his wife. And during the few hours that remained to her before that crucial meeting, she would have to search her own mind and discover what answer she intended to give him.

She didn't love him, of that she was quite certain, nor did she in the least want to marry him. But she liked him; she appreciated his understanding sympathy; she was even a trifle flattered at the thought of his love and fidelity. But, mingled with all this, there was a little fear of him. His was a very powerful and dominating personality.

Sometimes she had felt almost as if he were hypnotizing her. That day in church, for instance. . . . She had almost believed that he would be capable of imposing his will upon her even in the matter of religion. She had followed his advice since her return to London and had gone sometimes into the Oratory to pray, driven thither by a force stronger than herself. Yes, he would demand a great deal of her in return for all that he was so royally able to bestow. Dominion over her soul as well as her body. She was younger and weaker than he, more accustomed to yielding and obeying. . . .

And, mingled with this fear, there was a strong sense of the hold he had upon her, so that she even feared he might persuade her to marry him against her own better judgment. There was so much in him to like and admire. He was utterly without the egoism that hurt one so in Rex. But he could never be the companion to her that Rex would have been. Rex could have given her the love and devotion of a husband combined with the frank, easy, equal comradeship of a brother or friend. There would have been an intimacy, an equality, which she could never feel with San Salvo. But she mustn't think of Rex. The thought of him brought a sense of desolation to her that was almost unbearable, and she forced back the tears till they stung and scalded her eyes. That was where her high, determined courage seemed to give way utterly.

Rex was in London, engaged to Iris Chapman, probably seeing her every day. Forgetting her perhaps completely, or, if he remembered her, doing so only with a sense of relief at his miraculous escape.

There was a subtle temptation in the thought of a life spent away from England, and in a foreign country where there would be no danger of ever seeing him again. That was the strongest incentive, and the one she felt she would have to resist with all her force, so subtle, so urgent was

its lure. She mustn't do San Salvo the great wrong of marrying him when she had no love to give him in return for all his devotion and fidelity, his care for her when she was alone and suffering, his constant solicitude for her welfare, and above all for his love, of which she was beginning to measure the height and depth. . . .

II

Laura was in a state of nervous agitation when the hour arrived, bringing with it a punctual San Salvo. She had slept little that night; her tortured thoughts had revolved interminably around the figures of the two men who had both in their own degree loved her.

Glancing at herself in a mirror as she passed downstairs, she saw that she was looking, as blondes often do in adverse circumstances, a little dingy. Even her hair seemed to have lost something of its pale brightness, and her deep mourning completed an aspect that was at once forlorn and dismal.

Perhaps it would have the effect of putting him off, she reflected hopefully, forgetting that when San Salvo had made up his mind to accomplish a particular task he permitted no obstacles to stand in his way.

The clock of a neighboring church struck four as he entered the room. The sight of him reassured her. His greeting was coldly conventional; there was nothing to indicate any special enthusiasm or pleasure. His dark face wore the almost sternly sympathetic look which had often given her courage at La Cerva when he had seemed to express tacitly his appreciation of her so great sorrow, while checking any disposition to inordinate grief and despair.

"I don't think you're looking very well," he said, surveying her closely.

He was prepared now to fight the whole world for the possession of this woman. She seemed in a sense to belong to him.

"Oh, I've had rather a trying time since I left La Cerva."

She tried to speak carelessly and indifferently. But all the time she was gathering courage for the interview, realizing that this time he was not in the mood to let her shirk the issue. His purpose showed grimly in his face.

She seemed to him woefully thin in her black *crêpe* dress, which was made very scantily, but in his eyes her sombre attire accentuated the brilliant fairness of her hair and skin. The thought that she could look dingy never occurred to him. It was indeed her excessive and unusual fairness that he admired so whole-heartedly. She was beautiful to-day beyond all his imagining.

"What are you going to do?" he asked, so suddenly that the words seemed to ring through the room like a miniature explosion.

"I really haven't had time to make any definite plans. But I shall be leaving here next week. It isn't convenient for Charmian to keep me any longer."

"You're not going to live alone, I hope?"

"Yes, that's just what I want to do. I'm looking for a country cottage—quite a small one."

"And Mrs. Karslake approves of this idea?"

"Well, I think she'd rather I went to live with my aunts. It sounds better, you know!"

"You're far too young to live alone. In my country you would have made a permanent home with your sister!"

"Perhaps Italian brothers-in-law are more complaisant than English ones."

"That has nothing to do with it. It's our custom. As long as a young girl has relations, she doesn't live alone—it wouldn't be considered *comme il faut*."

"In this country it really isn't at all unusual. Lots of girls have their own flats and live apart from their parents."

"Surely not in your position?"

"But I haven't any position. I must manage as best I can with the small income I've got. Really, I think it'll be rather fun. I shall have to learn to cook. You see, I've never been taught anything useful."

Her eyes brimmed with merriment; he glimpsed then the irresponsible child in her, and it made his heart ache. He simply couldn't forgive Charmian's colossal selfishness. . . .

"And Mr. Forde?" he asked tentatively. "You've seen no more of him?"

She shook her head. "I don't suppose I shall ever see him again. He's engaged to be married. Darell told me about it. Have you seen Darell?"

"Yes, I saw him on my arrival last night. He was in a good deal of pain."

"I'm sorry. I wondered why he hadn't been here again."

She leaned back in her chair. The mention of Rex had banished the laughter from her face. She had now a kind of lost, defeated look which gave her the aspect of an unhappy, disappointed child.

"Laura"—he called her by name for the first time, and this prepared her for what was so surely inescapably in store for her—"I came here to-day to ask you to marry me."

His deep brown eyes were shining; they had lost their stern, sombre expression. His aspect was strangely alive and alert. He looked almost capable, she thought, of carrying her off to Italy against her will.

"But I'm not at all the right wife for you—you must see that," she objected.

Her voice was no longer quite steady. Her will was weakening. She didn't love him, but she was conscious to-day of his attraction as she had never been before. She could not define it; it lay perhaps in his strength and power, diminished a little now because he loved and feared to lose her. His words seemed to open out wide horizons. He was offering her a new life amid novel surroundings. away from all the pain of the past. Away from Rex . . . his falseness, his perfidy. He was inviting her to share his great position and vast wealth. He seemed to have come with both hands filled with alluring gifts.

And in return she had nothing to give, except a weak liking and admiration wholly devoid of love.

He rose and came nearer to her.

"I don't care if you're the right sort of wife for me or not," he said harshly; "I know that I want to marry you—you're the only woman I've ever cared for or ever could care for. Why should you think you're not the right wife for me?"

"Because I belong to another country, to another religion. I've hardly any money and you have a very great deal. I'm a stranger to your people and to your gods!"

"All that means nothing if we love each other. Do you love me?"

Their eyes met. "He's quite capable of making me say that I do," she thought helplessly. But aloud she answered:

"I told you the other day that I loved Rex Forde. Did you expect me to change so quickly?"

"No, I hardly expected that. Still, you're surely not going to spoil your life forever for the sake of this man who cared so little for you that he immediately became engaged to another woman? You have more pride than that."

She listened in silence. So he didn't mean to fear Rex as a rival any more.

"You were very kind to me at La Cerva," she said at last, "but I never thought you could really care for me, knowing all that you did know ——"

"Oh, I cared for you, as you call it, long before then. I went to La Cerva because you were there, and I wanted to see you again and make quite sure. Then I found I'd always loved you."

Across her present loneliness and desolation his words did bring a comforting reassurance. He, with a full knowledge of all that had gone before, was inviting her to build her life anew—with him. She was to turn her eyes from those devastated areas wrecked by that mighty earthquake in which all the old landmarks, the familiar, beloved figures, had been so remorselessly swept away. He was offering her also novelty and adventure—things that appealed to all that was youthful and eager within her. Why not go away and live in a country where there was no chance of seeing Rex? San Salvo was right; she couldn't remain forever alone because Rex had proved faithless. He must go his way and she hers.

San Salvo took her hand and held it in his. His clasp was gentle but there was strength in it too; she derived support from the contact. She didn't love him—she was quite sure of that—yet somehow he was dear. Seeing him thus again in London, he seemed to have acquired new qualities; he was less of a stranger, more of an intimate friend. He was associated with her past suffering. And he loved her. That was his chief claim to her friendship. She thought then that few women could have listened to him in vain.

"Won't you give me your answer?" he said. His voice was harsh with a strange emotion. She realized then that the suspense was making him suffer.

"Will you let me think it over? Come back to-morrow." She rose as if to dismiss him. But he stood his ground. He wasn't going to leave her upon such a slight reassurance as that. He must have something at once more explicit and more definite.

"Ah, but you must promise!" he said.

"Promise?"

"To see me when I do come. I couldn't bear it if you were only to write."

"I'll promise to see you. But don't build on my answer. I needn't tell you why. You know too much of all that has happened to me lately. It's too soon as yet for me to forget ——"

Again there was that terrible, defeated look in her eyes that tortured him. Not all at once could she cut the knots that bound her to the past. Not all at once could she bury out of sight Rex's beautiful haunting face. . . .

San Salvo took her hand and raised it to his lips.

"Then to-morrow ——" he said.

She could see in his face that he still had hope; he had lost nothing of that splendid unconquered look. She felt again like a pawn in his hard strong hands. . . .

III

She remained in the drawing-room after he had gone. It was not long, however, before Charmian ran breathlessly into the room. Her dark face was quite agitated.

"You haven't sent him away?" she cried.

Laura was silent. She was beginning to realize the kind of insistent pressure that would undoubtedly be brought to bear upon her, especially by her sister.

"What did he want? Why did he come?" pursued Charmian. "What did he say to you?" There was a kind

of angry suspicion in her tone, mingling with its undisguised curiosity.

Laura knew it would be useless to try to conceal the truth from her. She had a way of finding out things, especially things one didn't want her to know. She must also have accurately guessed the purport of San Salvo's visit.

"He came to ask me to marry him. Isn't that what you expected, Charmy? I told him I didn't think I was the right wife for him. I'm of another country—another faith——" Her voice was emotionless and almost mechanical.

"What does that matter? You're not a Roman Catholic, but you aren't quite a heathen, I suppose? Of course you would have to be married in a Catholic church and promise to allow your children to be brought up in their father's faith. But that won't matter in Italy—they're nearly all Roman Catholics there. As for your being of another country, you forget that he's half English and speaks English like an Englishman. And then he is so enormously rich, Laura—I do hope you haven't sent him away for good!"

"No—he's coming back to-morrow. I've promised in any case to see him again. You see, he's been so terribly kind, and I didn't want to hurt his feelings."

Charmian's face became suffused with a dark, angry color.

"You little fool!" she exclaimed furiously, "you can't possibly mean that you're going to refuse him? Why, it's the chance of your life. And don't imagine, please, if you are such an idiot as not to marry him, that Hugo and I are going to do anything for you. We shall just wash our hands of you and leave you to stew in your own juice!"

She was very angry—more angry than Laura had ever

seen her, even in the days of her tempestuous, uncontrolled youth. Two bright pink patches flamed in her cheeks.

"But you have washed your hands of me already, haven't you?" said Laura quietly. "I mean, you've said I couldn't stay here after next week. I can't see that it matters to you what I do or where I go to."

"But Hugo's heard in the city that he's simply rolling—his property in the Argentine is increasing enormously in value. He may be one of the richest men in Europe in a few years. You cannot be such a fool as to send him away for the sake of any foolish schoolgirl fancy you may have had for Rex!"

Laura had been awaiting that arrow; it was bound to be sped sooner or later. She had therefore nerved herself to receive the piercing wound it would inevitably produce.

"I am not thinking of Rex so much as of San Salvo. I don't think I could make him happy. Just at first perhaps because he loves me, but afterwards when we were living in Rome with his grandmother he would be certain to find he had made a mistake."

Charmian was somewhat relieved to find she had given the matter even this much of careful consideration. She really wasn't so impulsive as one feared.

"Living in Rome—*with his grandmother?*" she repeated, amazed.

"Yes. She brought him up, you know; after his mother died, she had entire charge of him. She is very stern and domineering—I think he is a little afraid of her even now, if he can be said to be afraid of anyone. And I'm quite sure she wouldn't approve of me because I'm a Protestant and English . . . besides, she is very anxious he should marry some girl in Rome."

"You seem to know a great deal about his private affairs," remarked Charmian dryly.

"Of course he has talked about these things to me. I

think he did so principally to distract me when I was so anxious about mother at La Cerva. And I was interested, I couldn't help being. He must have been such a sad, lonely little boy with only that stern old grandmother. I felt sorry for him. It explained him to me—it taught me to understand his shyness and timidity that are really unnatural in such a man."

"Do you dislike him?" asked Charmian.

"No—I like him very much. At Cerva he was my only friend, and he was very kind. But I'm afraid of him ——"

"Nonsense—you could always keep him at your feet if you knew how to play your cards well. You need never be afraid of a man as long as he's at your feet and he isn't sure of you. I really can't think what you're jibbing at! Laura, I do entreat you not to ruin your whole life!"

"That's what I'm trying to avoid doing. And I don't want to ruin his either. You see, he's got everything else—I don't want him to make a mistake about such a big thing as marriage."

"But you must think of yourself too. You're alone and frightfully badly off—Hugo was saying only to-day that he doesn't think you can possibly make both ends meet unless you get something to do. And this man can give you simply everything in the world, and I imagine he loves you or he wouldn't pursue you in this way, first at Cerva and then here. What else can you want, in the name of all that's sane? Is it because you don't feel romantically and sentimentally in love with him? That sort of thing soon wears off even in the happiest marriages, I can tell you. We have to look at life sensibly and practically and without any illusions in these days."

"I quite see your point of view, Charmian. But it isn't mine, and, after all, I'm one of the two people principally concerned."

"Perhaps you'd like Hugo to have a talk with him, and

find out exactly what settlements he's prepared to make? I'm sure he would be generous, but it's always better to have these things down in black and white!"

This sordid attitude revolted Laura.

"I do hope he'll do nothing of the kind! I shall write and forbid San Salvo to come here again if there's any chance of Hugo's mixing himself up in it. If I marry him it won't be for his money."

"You needn't be rude about Hugo. He's one of the cleverest men in the City."

"I'm sure he is, and I never meant to be rude. Only—this isn't going to be a deal, Charmy."

"What odd expressions you use," said Charmian, with a little laugh that didn't ring quite true. She swallowed her anger, however, only thinking that Laura had a singularly infelicitous manner of expressing herself and describing what was quite normal and commonplace. A deal, indeed. Why, there was no one else to see to anything except Hugo, who was Laura's trustee. She possessed neither parents nor guardians, so it was highly necessary for someone to watch over her interests. And no one could be in a better position to do so than Hugo. He would safeguard them in every imaginable way. . . .

It was quite possible that San Salvo might be induced to make over absolutely to her a very large sum that would provide against any future contingencies, even if the marriage went awry after a few years. And in the event of there being no children, Laura would probably bequeath any sum of the kind to her English relations. Charmian's rapid imagination saw her two children in the far future being generously dowered by their wealthy and munificent aunt.

But all the time she was talking, Laura felt her sympathy going out more and more to San Salvo, who she resolved should never in any circumstances be victimized.

He loved her, and he wanted to marry her and remove her forever from what had become to her an intensely unsympathetic environment. The knowledge of his love touched her. She had so little to give in return for all that he so royally offered! Only, she was resolved at any cost to protect him from Charmian and Hugo and their predatory proclivities. . . .

She felt that if he could have a glimpse of Charmian's sordid rapacity, it would effectually shock and horrify all that was innately honorable and fastidious in him.

"I only wish I'd seen him! I fully intended to catch him as he went out, but he left so much sooner than I expected. He was too quick for me, too. I should so like to have shown him that you had relations who were capable of managing your affairs, and that he mustn't expect to have it all his own way."

Laura felt a deep inward thankfulness that the meeting had not taken place.

"If you really wish me to marry him or even to consider the question, you'll leave him alone," she said. "I don't mean to be sold."

Her eyes flashed, and Charmian had to face the fact that she had gone as far as she dared.

"I know I'm not of age, but I must manage my affairs in my own way."

"You'll make a horrible hash of everything. You know nothing of the world. Many of these modern girls of sixteen could give you points."

"I'd much rather make a hash of things than let him believe I wanted anything from him in the way of money."

"People always talk like that before they're married. All for love and silly stuff like that. But afterwards a woman's often sorry when she has to go to her husband for every postage stamp."

"I shall be able to pay for my own clothes and stamps," said Laura loftily.

Clearly she was in an obstinate mood; it was quite useless to argue with her or try to advise her. Perhaps the truth was, that she didn't really mean to marry him. And yet this afternoon there was a look of restored life and animation about her that one might see on the faces of those who had been resuscitated after a prolonged immersion in deep waters.

Laura had emerged alive and beautiful from that overwhelming flood. . . .

"Of course we all react to a man's admiration," thought Charmian, as she envisaged this abrupt transformation in her sister. One could actually glimpse something of real beauty in Laura now. She wasn't nearly so colorless. Fair people, Charmian reflected, so often looked dingy when tired, out of sorts, or unhappy, whereas dark women survived these adverse tests with far less loss. There was no doubt that San Salvo had accomplished a good deal. He must be patient and wait, and then no doubt in time Laura would forget her folly in regard to Rex Forde.

It might be, though, that he was in a hurry to leave. His precipitate arrival might presage an equally precipitate departure, especially if he found he couldn't have things his own way. Charmian sincerely wished she had seen him. She could have given him oceans of good advice, could have fanned the feeble flame of hope in order to avert such a catastrophic retreat. She had no confidence in her sister's capacity for handling a difficult, complicated situation; she possessed neither wisdom nor dexterity nor adequate knowledge of the world. Of course the man had come a little too soon. Laura was still deeply hurt and humiliated by the fact of Rex Forde's defection, his hasty engagement to another woman.

But when Charmian thought of San Salvo's fortune, she

felt a little greedy. She would dearly have liked to have the handling of some of it. Solid securities paying regular and fabulous dividends with perhaps a yearly bonus into the bargain! After all, the Stock Exchange was a gamble, and there was nothing really solid about Hugo's wealth. It was there one day, but who could say that it might not be gone on the morrow? Charmian checked these lugubrious thoughts. Hugo knew more about finance than anyone in the City; his luck was proverbial, and he was really cautious and prudent in the handling of money. He would never let her down. Wild-cat schemes and specious prospectuses had no attraction for him. But he knew a good thing when he saw it, and could play a waiting game, confident that in time it would fructify like the good seed a hundredfold. . . .

IV

Laura lay on the couch in her room, thinking of San Salvo. He imposed himself upon her thoughts and imagination with his tall, strong lean figure, his blazing eyes, his fine expressive face. She tried to think of Rex, but the face of Rex had become a little remote and unreal, as if it had faded into the distance. San Salvo occupied the stage and seemed to sweep aside all other issues with an imperious gesture that held a kind of violent insistence.

But she couldn't deceive herself any more. He loved her, and now she felt that she had always known it. She had suspected it from the first, and had then dismissed the suggestion as the outcome of mere vanity. But now that it had acquired the precision of a certainty, she had perforce to consider it in all its aspects, as well as in its probable reactions upon her own life and destiny. If Charmian had only kept silence, forbearing to enunciate

all those vulgar, sordid, worldly reasons for accepting him, Laura believed that her own task would have been easier.

She didn't love him, she was sure of that—the sight of him gave her no thrill such as the mere appearance of Rex's sleek black head amid a crowd of people could do. Her heart never beat the faster for his coming; nor could he elicit from her that wild passionate feeling which Rex had only too easily evoked. Sometimes when she had come upon Rex suddenly and without warning, she had felt almost faint with emotion. It was romantic, sentimental, what you will, but it possessed an authentic quality, and it stood for something that was at once urgent, genuine, and a little terrifying.

With San Salvo, on the contrary, she felt calm and controlled and wise. More at peace. More tranquil and reassured as to the outcome. A greater confidence in the quality of his feeling for her. There was something rock-like and reliable in his character that spelt security and permanence.

Imperceptibly her thoughts acquired a new orientation. She found, with a little shock of dismay, that she was actually contemplating the possibility of marrying him. If she didn't love him extravagantly, she at any rate liked him very much indeed. She liked everything about him, his hard, austere, finely cut face, the deep brown eyes with their sudden flashes of merriment, his rare smile, the touch of his hand on hers.

And indubitably there was something vast and grand about the life he was able to offer her. It was utterly removed from anything she had yet experienced. A Vita Nuova in what was practically to her an unknown country. Few people who have passed through a prolonged period of sorrow and disappointment can be altogether indifferent to such a prospect as that. A clean page . . . a new leaf. Romance—adventure—a step into the unknown. Some-

thing that was very young and eager within her responded to that lure. She had wanted desperately to go away from London, with all its ghosts of the past, and now she was offered an opportunity of leaving it permanently. Never to see Rex . . . in time perhaps never to think of him again. To be far away when he married Iris Chapman. But only to contemplate his marriage was to recover all her past pain, and to be plunged anew into that abyss of humiliation caused by his cool desertion. No one guessed how keenly she had suffered except perhaps San Salvo, who had seen her immediately after the blow had fallen. From him she hadn't been able to hide it, and it made confession and explanation alike unnecessary now, since at least she had never sought to disguise from him the depth of her own feeling for Rex. Hadn't he been there, helping her, in that moment of intimate, poignant loss? He knew almost all that there was to know about that passionate episode. It hadn't affected his own love for her, that seemed to burn like a steady flame. . . .

Yes, if she married San Salvo it wouldn't be, as everyone would certainly imagine, on account of his great possessions, but simply because of his power to take her away from all that was now torturing her. She would turn her face irrevocably from the past and all that it held of love, sweetness, and calamity. The prospect of that new life, spent with him, possessed an appeal, an attraction, to which she could no longer remain insensible. She seemed to be looking towards vast and spacious horizons. She couldn't refuse his gifts. This was a difficult bit of the road, she couldn't face it alone; she wasn't in a position to reject any proffered help.

Moved by a sudden impulse, she crossed the room and went over to the writing-table. She took up a pen, paused for a moment, and then scribbled a few lines on a sheet of paper:

"Will you come to-morrow about three? I shall be very glad to see you.—LAURA."

He would know when he read it that she didn't mean to send him away.

It was strange to remember now that almost since their first meeting she had felt a strong conviction that he was destined to play a prominent part in her life. . . .

CHAPTER X

I

SAN SALVO was a few minutes late, but when he did appear he showed no signs of having hurried. He came in looking quiet and grave. There was no complacency or assurance of approaching victory in his dark, austere face. Doubt there was, and a certain suspense that made it seem grim with repression. He took Laura's hand, but to-day he did not kiss it. They sat near each other on two chairs by the window.

They looked out upon the typical London square, where the grass was growing green with the advance of spring, and a faint bloom showed upon the trees and shrubs. Beyond could be seen the irregular profiles of tall, grey houses leaning against the sky.

Spring was in the air to-day. It confessed itself not only in the faint, impalpable film upon the trees, but in the crocuses that made a rim of fiery gold upon the brown beds, and in the soft, caressing airs that stole across the great city with a whisper of flowers blossoming in woodland fastnesses. A thrush sang lustily in a lilac bush. Above the sky was pale blue—a smoky blue, not quite clear, that resembled a veil.

Suddenly she thought of Italy, with its flaming sunshine, its sapphire skies, its lavish blossoming. She thought of La Cerva, with its bright blue bay and the violet arm of Monte Celio dipping into the water; the island lying like a flower upon the breast of the sea; Corsica rising out of the golden mists of dawn like some

long-drowned Atlantis emerging from its watery grave and lifting purple peaks to the sky.

"I've come for my answer. Will you marry me?" San Salvo said, so abruptly that she started.

She looked at him, and a renewed sense of reassurance possessed her. She forced herself to dwell upon the thought of his indubitable power to take her away, back to Italy. Holding her, as it were, so that she couldn't escape even if she wished to. Now that all else had proved fluid and impermanent, she wanted to feel herself secure and even chained; she didn't fear his domination half so much as the prospect of the kind of freedom she had tasted during the past few weeks. It was desolate, it didn't lead anywhere. In a sense, it had frightened her. Better any prison than such liberty as that. . . .

She put out her hand.

"Yes," she said. "I told you yesterday everything I could think of that was against our marriage. I tried to show you how unsuitable I was to be your wife. But if you still think you care——"

"I do care," he said quickly, "so much that your objections—some of them very important ones—don't seem to count. At least they are not insuperable, thank God. Of course I shall have to apply to the Church for a dispensation. . . . If you will consent to make the necessary sacrifices."

Laura remembered vaguely what Charmian had told her about the children. But of course as they would be Italians it was only right that they should be Catholics. Even Charmian, who was moderately High Church in her views, hadn't seen any objection to that. And it wasn't as if she, Laura, cared much about the outward forms of religion. She had prayed a great deal during her mother's illness—perhaps more than she had ever prayed before, but she felt that it wasn't in her to share San Salvo's passionate faith.

A vision of him rose up before her . . . they were kneeling side by side in the church at La Cerva . . . his eyes were fixed upon the Tabernacle, his lips were moving as if in mystical colloquy. Oh, why wouldn't he recognize, before it was too late, the enormous gulf that divided them? Why wouldn't he envisage her utter unsuitability for the position he so humbly offered her? He was so bent on ruining his own life, since she had consented to marry him, not because she loved him, but because she wished to escape from an insupportable situation. He should have had a woman's whole love, a devotion beyond measure and imagination. What she could give him, of timid, weakly liking, was wholly incommensurate with his deserts. Religion with her only formed part of the inexorable routine of life; it wasn't as it was with him, a faith, a passion, a consuming fire. Except in those days of bitter anxiety at La Cerva, it had never touched her with any spiritual intimacy.

"I will make any necessary sacrifices," she said, slowly.

"Thank you—that'll make it quite easy for me to obtain a dispensation. And later, when you're living in Italy and find yourself surrounded with these things—you may perhaps be induced to consider the claims of the Catholic Church."

His voice had a curiously wistful sound, as if a secret and passionate desire informed it.

"I've never thought much about religion," she admitted.

It was characteristic of him, she considered, to permit this question to occupy such a prominent position during the very first moments of their engagement. He really did seem to put it before everything else. Perhaps he was trying rather wistfully to reconcile the two dominant passions of his life, and finding it more difficult to do so than he had supposed. But to her the matter of religion only added another and a yet more unnatural complexity to

something that was already sufficiently imprudent. His love for her alone made this unwise marriage possible, since the objections to it struck at the very foundations of life. She felt those disparate elements clamoring like a belligerent army against the proposition. Was his love strong enough to resist such attacks?

"I don't think I've very much faith in anything," she continued; "you really mustn't expect too much of me. I'm very tired. Since my mother's death I've felt rather stunned and stupid."

"You poor child—of course you have," he said compassionately. "Perhaps I ought to have waited. But, you see, I couldn't wait. I've wanted so to take you away from it all."

He put out his hand and clasped hers.

"You're still quite sure—in spite of all I've told you?" she said.

Suddenly she thought how terrible it would be if she were to spoil San Salvo's life. An unwise, imprudent marriage could so utterly mar its fair promise. He had so much . . . he had everything . . . he mustn't let her step in and ruin it all. . . .

He smiled. "I'm quite sure," he said confidently, for her impetuous words had broken the ice and made her somehow seem a little nearer. "You've made me sure. You've been so frank and open—I'm sure we shall do our best, both of us, to make it an enormous success!"

He let his eyes rest upon her adoringly. She was lovelier than all the mental pictures he had formed of her during their brief separation. He felt a renewed courage and it impelled him to say:

"How soon can we be married, Laura?"

"Oh, not for ages. You see, I'm in such deep mourning."

"That would be the best of reasons for having a very

quiet wedding. It's March now—shall we say the end of April? Soon after Easter?"

"I'm sure I couldn't possibly be ready in such a short time. Why, it's only seven weeks till the end of April."

He drew her a little nearer to him.

"But that seems a very long time to me," he said.

She was silent.

"I want to begin our new life in Italy as soon as possible. Don't let's wait, or waste precious weeks that we might spend together."

"Very well," she said.

After all, what did it matter? Sooner or later it would have to happen, since now she was pledged to him, and had given him her promise after deep and poignant deliberation. Besides, more than ever did she hate the thought of remaining in London in the unsympathetic atmosphere of her sister's house, with the dreadful ever-present possibility of encountering Rex. Far better leave England as soon as she could and start afresh in that new life of which San Salvo had spoken with such confident happiness. Since he was giving her so much, giving her royally of all that he possessed, she could surely yield to him in this.

"You mean then that after Easter——"

"Yes, if you wish it. If you don't think it's too soon."

"Thank you," he said simply. "You are very good to me, Laura. I must write to Rome and tell them——"

The thought of that inevitable communication dimmed the brightness of the present moment. He put out his arms and drew her close to him as if with an involuntary gesture of protection.

He was telling her without words that he would always care for her and defend her against all enemies, insidious and avowed. She felt again that sense of well-being and security which his mere presence had been able to bestow upon her at La Cerva. It gave her hope and confidence,

and somewhere a little thrill of unexpected joy. She turned her face towards him, and he kissed her for the first time on her forehead and lips.

"I'm wronging him as well as myself," she thought a little desolately, drawing away from him. His kiss had taken her back to that mad moment when Rex had held her in his arms and she had surrendered to his embrace. Joy and terror had mingled in that moment. But now there was no joy, only a cold, doubting fear. Wouldn't it have been far wiser to go away abroad quite alone? She would have been just as safe then from all danger of encountering Rex. She needn't have married anyone. She had plenty to live on in a very quiet, solitary fashion. People could still live cheaply enough in Italy if they avoided the big cities and gay winter resorts. She ought to have thought of all that before she consented to marry San Salvo. . . .

San Salvo was not without his own preoccupations in that wonderful moment. The thought of his grandmother, far away in the old Roman palace, haunted him rather disagreeably. He had given her no reason for this sudden journey to England just when he should have been returning to Rome after an unnecessarily protracted absence at La Cerva. But now that the engagement was actually accomplished, confession could no longer be delayed. How would she take it? Would history repeat itself so that she would display the same displeasure and hostility she evinced when his father had married a woman of alien nationality and heretical faith? Even his mother's subsequent conversion and devout piety had done little to mitigate the antagonism evoked by that marriage. His face grew stern as he meditated upon that bygone episode; it seemed to diminish his sense of triumph and success, revealing unsuspected pitfalls.

They were standing a little apart now, aghast at their own rashness, he scarcely less than Laura.

He was the first to recover. No one should come between them, now that he had won her. His grandmother shouldn't be permitted to spoil either his life or Laura's. His father must have shown some weakness, perhaps even some lack of consideration for the woman he had married. Surely he must have been to blame to let things come to such a pass without lifting a finger to oppose that fierce and passionate will.

San Salvo's memories of his mother were growing faint, but he recalled her always as a beautiful, delicious presence whose loss had darkened his early years. In Rome she had become almost a legendary figure; people who were old enough to remember her, still spoke of her beauty, her gracious ways, her acts of charity. . . .

"I waited till everything was settled before telling my grandmother," he said at last, feeling as if a little chill wind had touched them. "You see, I had so little hope——" He looked at her as if he were scarcely able even now to believe in the actuality of their engagement. "I didn't want it to be discussed—I'm sure you'll understand. People invariably give you contrary advice. And then I loved you so much—it didn't seem possible that you could ever learn to care for me." His face was all softened now as if with some deep inward emotion. He came a little nearer, took her hand, and, raising it, held it to his lips. "When one loves, you know, one fears so much!"

The words rang in her head. *When one loves, one fears so much.* . . . That cold, sickening, slaying fear that froze one's very heart with apprehension. Oh, she had known it almost from the first moment of her engagement to Rex! It had been her constant companion through so many months; it had only perished with the slow and difficult dying of her heart's desire.

After he had left her, she was thankful she had consented to an early marriage. She would thus have less

time to think. And she would spend as much as she possibly could of the interval away from London.

II

Charmian had watched the coming and going of San Salvo from her upper window. She would have immensely liked to go down and see him, but really Laura had behaved and spoken so queerly on the preceding day that even her cool courage proved unequal to the task.

His prolonged visit gave her, however, considerable ground for hope. She pictured him pleading his cause, and Laura listening with that remote, unseeing look in her eyes which had of late been so observable, just as if her whole attention were being given to something or someone who wasn't there. But it was really impossible to think that any girl could deliberately fling away such a chance as that! Charmian was over-ready to accredit everyone with her own materialistic outlook, so full of common sense and entirely free from anything approaching sentiment. She meant to bring up her little daughter to a just appreciation of the worldly advantages of wealth and position. Then one needn't be alarmed as to her probable behavior in a crisis such as was now confronting the ill-equipped Laura.

She ran down to the drawing-room, but Laura had already vanished and had locked herself into her own room to consider the magnitude of her decision. It was something that would affect her whole life, would pursue her far down into the years, something whose consequences she could never escape. The plan of her life, its very pattern, would be utterly altered. She would belong to another country—she who had seldom left her own except for a few months and then had been so unspeakably thankful to return. She had been weak perhaps to

yield so soon—even San Salvo had shown her he hadn't anticipated such a speedy engagement. He had been, indeed, so doubtful as to the outcome of his journey that he hadn't yet mentioned her to his grandmother. He had come to England eager, uncertain, not daring to hope and yet apparently not despairing of success. She was glad that he knew all about her love for Rex. She had been quite frank with him on that point at Cerva. Thus, he must be perfectly aware that her own liking for him was a weak, immature sentiment. Yet he had such confidence in his own power to make her happy, he was so undoubting as to the ultimate outcome of the experiment! He had always succeeded, and there was no reason why he shouldn't succeed now. . . .

It was only when she remembered his kiss, that she doubted and feared. She had recaptured nothing of that fierce emotion that had possessed her when Rex held her in his arms. She had felt only reluctance and a shrinking fear. But it had set the seal on their engagement, and she felt that she couldn't draw back now even if she wanted to.

She went across the room to her writing-table. There was a photograph of Rex standing there in a silver frame. He had given it to her just before their engagement, and it did portray something of the curious beauty of the original. The dark eyes gazed into hers; the mouth, with its faint smile, looked as if it were just going to utter some word of whimsical tenderness. But she couldn't bear to look at it now. He didn't love her—had never loved her. At the first hint of disaster he had fled from her, as rats, it is said, will leave a sinking ship. He refused to face poverty even for her sake. And Charmian shared his point of view; she would have thought them both mad if they hadn't broken off their engagement in the face of such hopeless prospects.

Laura tore the photograph across and across. Her task

was easy, for it was only mounted on drawing-paper. A jagged line divided the eyes and severed the mouth. There was nothing left of that presentment now except a few unrecognizable fragments. She flung the pieces into the waste-paper basket. It was at this crucial moment that Charmian's knock upon the door sounded across the silence.

"Are you there, Laura? Can I come in?"

Laura went to the door and unlocked it. "Come in," she said.

Charmian, entering, glanced round the room. Her observant eyes perceived at once the empty tell-tale frame and the brown and white fragments that lay in the waste-paper basket. A good beginning that . . . it augured well for the future.

"Now tell me all about it!" she said, in a brisk, bracing tone that jarred horribly upon Laura's nerves. She wanted to be alone and quiet, to face the situation she had herself assisted in creating. She didn't want to talk about it or discuss it with anyone.

"There's nothing to tell you except that we are engaged to be married." Laura's voice was toneless. She couldn't even now believe in the truth of the statement. Engaged to be married? It sounded even to her own ears so incredible.

Charmian flung her arms round her neck and kissed her.

"Darling, I was so sure you'd be sensible when the time came! You couldn't possibly have refused that enormous fortune. It wouldn't have been fair either to yourself or to us. You see, you brought our incomes down to such a low average. And you could never have lived on two hundred and fifty a year. It would have been very hard on Hugo too—no man likes to have a poor relation-in-law. He would have wanted to do something for you, and he really couldn't have afforded that without depriving our

own two angels. One must never be selfish or play only for one's own hand in this life, my dear Laura. One must look at all sides of a question and realize the possible reactions!"

"I am glad you are so pleased," said Laura, releasing herself. It had never occurred to her to consider the possible reactions of Hugo and Charmian to the news of her engagement. Especially when they wouldn't personally participate in the wealth San Salvo had to offer. But she saw quite clearly what her sister meant. She would be "off their hands." They wouldn't even have to send her a five-pound note at Christmas. On the contrary, it was she who would be expected to disburse generously on such festivals to the two "angels."

She was secretly amused, because she realized that she had acquired a new value and significance in Charmian's eyes.

"You are looking very lugubrious, my dear, and not at all as if you'd pulled off something of the first magnitude," said Charmian. "I hope you didn't throw too much cold water on all his ardor? Men are very curious. They will stand a great deal up to a certain point, but there *is* a breaking point with them as well as with us." There was a hint of warning in her tone.

"I don't think I threw any cold water. He understands everything perfectly and he's willing to run the risk—he has such absolute confidence in our being happy."

"He must have a singularly sanguine temperament," thought Charmian, though she did not venture to utter this opinion aloud. She was sure from what Laura had just let drop that she must have been more than tiresome during that prolonged interview.

"Well, when is it to be?" she inquired gaily.

"After Easter—at the end of April. Don't you think it's rather soon? But he said that we could have it very

quietly on account of my mourning. That'll be much better—we should both prefer it."

Charmian adored publicity. She loved to have her photograph published in the picture papers and to see her dresses described at various important functions. Thus she was quite unable to understand her sister's attitude, but since San Salvo seemed so strangely to share it, she considered it would be futile to interfere. And however quiet the actual ceremony might be, there would be plenty of noise about the marriage in all the papers. An excellent lesson for Rex! He needed a rebuff of the kind, and he must be made to see that Laura didn't intend to ruin her life by fretting over his defection.

"Of course you must do whatever he likes," she said. "Has he got any relations to come over for it?"

"I don't think there are any near ones. His grandmother wouldn't be likely to come, you know. She's old, for one thing, and then it'll be a mixed marriage—she will disapprove of that for him. I believe she's very strict. But he says if I make all the promises it will be easy enough for him to get a dispensation."

"And are you going to make them?" asked Charmian curiously.

"Yes. I said I'd make all the necessary sacrifices."

"How wonderful you are, my dear," said Charmian, with a touch of irony. "He seems to have been very persuasive since you gave way so readily on all these points. And only yesterday I was actually afraid you meant to refuse him. I hope you are really prepared to try and make a success of it?"

"Of course I am. But I'm afraid all the time that I'm doing Paul a great wrong." As she spoke she realized that she had called him by his Christian name for the first time. Paul . . . Paul . . . she thought it suited him.

"Why, what nonsense! You're going to make him the

happiest man on earth! They all think that at first, you know."

"Even when they know you don't love them?"

"My dear, I've never been able to understand all this silly talk about love. It belongs to a bygone period of poke bonnets and crinolines. If you like him, that's quite enough. You don't dislike him, do you, Laura?"

"No—I like many things about him. His strength, his power, the feeling that I shall always be safe with him, and quite sure of his love."

Charmian stared at her. This artless epitome of her feelings was really extraordinarily significant; a deeper, cleverer woman could hardly have been more revealing.

"It really sounds to my practical mind a most promising basis upon which to build a lifelong happiness," she remarked with cool irony. "You have managed uncommonly well, Laura. It is even better than a little aversion, which we know has been productive of so many happy unions!"

"I don't feel any aversion," said Laura.

She wondered indeed if she felt anything at all except this measureless cold desolation about her heart when she thought of Rex. His torn photograph lying there, symbolic of the greater destruction of all the beautiful, tender hopes that had been bound up in him. . . .

"Well, we must lose no time in seeing about your clothes," said Charmian characteristically. "We might run over to Paris if you liked."

"Oh, I should like that very much. I hate London now. I want to get away from all the fuss."

"I'm sure Hugo will fork out," said Charmian; "he'll be so delighted; you'll go up miles in his opinion. And of course you'll stay with us now till you're married. It must take place from this house. What a comfort to feel your future is so safe and assured! I can't tell you how much I

disliked the thought of your living alone in the country. People would have blamed me for allowing it!"

"Would they? But it wouldn't have been your fault," said Laura, wonderingly.

She was always astonished when Charmian showed herself in any way vulnerable to the onslaughts of gossip, or sensitive to what people said about her.

"I'm sure I heard Hugo come in. I must run down and tell him the good news," said Charmian. "He'll be so relieved. We must invite your Paul to dinner. Try and think of some people you'd like to ask to meet him. No dowds, you know!"

She dropped a kiss lightly on her sister's forehead and ran out of the room. There was no doubt that Laura had entered upon this engagement with a due sense of the solemnity of her promise and all that it would in the future entail. But there were certain things about her that still puzzled Mrs. Karslake when she meditated upon their conversation. That speech, for instance, about feeling safe and secure. . . . Did it mean, perhaps, that, without knowing or realizing it in the least, Laura was just a tiny little bit in love with San Salvo?

That was the only possible explanation she could discover of her sister's ambiguous attitude.

"Well, I'm d—ned glad to hear she's pulled it off," said Hugo, as he listened to his wife's delighted recital of the afternoon's happenings. "We shall have to think about a wedding present. A rope of pearls or a diamond tiara for the Duchess of San Salvo, I suppose? Now if she'd settled to be Mrs. Rex Forde, we should have been let off with a silver tea service!"

"This is going to be an excellent lesson for Rex," said Charmian, "and one he richly deserves. No, I don't think a rope of pearls would be at all too much in the circum-

stances, Hugo. It will remind her sometimes in the future to be generous to our darling angels!"

Hugo grinned. "I see—bread upon the waters," he observed cynically. But he admired his wife's astute, far-reaching perspicuity enormously. He almost wished it were possible to employ her in the City. She would have been invaluable to him in his office when he was suddenly faced with an important decison.

"How is Laura feeling about it all?" he asked. Lately he had been rather haunted by his sister-in-law's pallid, melancholy face, with its large sad eyes. "Does she seem at all happy?"

He hoped that Charmian hadn't brought too much pressure to bear.

"Well, she's not exactly enthusiastic," admitted Charmian; "but, on the other hand, I don't think she's unhappy. If you ask me, I believe she cares for him much more than she knows. I shouldn't be suprised if she awoke one day to find herself up to the neck in it! And really, he *is* an attractive sort of person and he must know exactly how to manage her. Already she's said she'd make all the necessary promises—sacrifices, she called them. She quite puzzles me, you know. I can't help thinking she's rather keen about him. You see, Rex did behave so very badly—it may have quite disillusioned her. He showed his hand so promptly!"

"I'm thankful she isn't going to marry that little blighter," said Hugo. "Even Darell can hardly speak temperately of him now. But he was always against the marriage. Didn't think him nearly good enough for Laura. And anyone can see the fellow's on the make!"

"We must have a dinner-party for San Salvo," said Charmian. "I don't think we need ask the aunts, do you? We can have them to luncheon one day to meet him! Of

course Aunt Sophy will disapprove of Laura's marrying a Roman Catholic."

"I expect he'll convert her in the end," prophesied Hugo. "She's just the sort. When are they to be married?"

"At the end of April—he even got her to consent to that," answered Charmian.

Hugo shook his head.

"It looks as if she wanted to escape at the earliest possible moment," he said.

"Well, I dare say she does," agreed Charmian.

CHAPTER XI

I

THE wedding, in accordance with the wishes of the two people principally concerned, took place early one morning at Westminster Cathedral. Laura looked very young and girlish in a dress of white *crêpe* with a white hat. She wore a magnificent rope of pearls presented to her by Hugo and Charmian rather as if it had been a reward for good conduct, and because when the critical moment came she hadn't failed them. . . .

The service was the briefest, and there were few people there. The small congregation included Charmian, Hugo, their children, Mrs. Marley and Patience, Darell Hayne, and one or two Italians from the Embassy. Charmian lamented the lack of all display, while Mrs. Marley was almost audibly disapproving. She did so hope that Laura would never regret her action, for, knowing as they all did how very much in love she had been with Rex Forde only a few months ago, it was obvious that she had married San Salvo entirely on account of his wealth. She had shrunk from the comparative poverty to which she found herself reduced after her mother's death, and had coolly rejected a very comfortable home that had been offered her.

Patience, in reply to these acid comments, only murmured:

"I do hope she'll be happy. He's got such charming manners. Really I can't help thinking it's what darling Phyllis hoped would happen."

But the bride's white, sad face haunted her. She wished that Laura hadn't been going away to make her home among strangers in a foreign country. She hoped San Salvo would be kind to her. One never knew with Italians —they had such violent tempers. She wished it had been Rex. . . .

Laura looked such a child beside her husband that even Charmian felt a little depressed about it. Supposing it shouldn't turn out a success? She hoped that she hadn't been too urgent and insistent about it to Laura. If anything went wrong, her sister might conceivably blame her, and Mrs. Karslake had an inherent dislike to being blamed. Everything she touched must be quite perfect. She really oughtn't to have set her hand to anything that might prove a failure. Besides, you were never sure where you were with Laura. She was terribly obstinate in a kind of dumb, patient way. . . .

Although he had said very little, Charmian was intuitively aware that Hugo hadn't really wished for the marriage, although attracted by the indubitable wealth of the bridegroom. No one in his opinion could be very unhappy if they were at the same time enormously rich. Gold was the only tolerable paving-stone for the feet. Still, there were a good many things against the marriage and he was fair enough to envisage them. The man was a foreigner and a Catholic, and Laura had never pretended to care for him. Moreover, she had been, until quite a short time ago, very deeply in love with another man. Hugo felt slightly uncomfortable as he bade the happy pair adieu at Victoria Station. He kissed Laura, feeling a slight sense of guilt, as if he had pushed her into it. She looked so very young and quite unfitted to cope with any difficult or profound problem. And this marriage, being in the nature of an experiment, was bound to offer problems of one kind or

another. She ought to have waited; after all, there hadn't been any violent hurry. . . .

As the train passed out of sight, his little sister-in-law seemed to vanish into the mists of an obscure and nebulous destiny.

II

San Salvo and his bride travelled by easy, leisurely stages across France, arriving at the Italian lakes at the beginning of May.

The journey passed like an enchanted dream to Laura; she never felt quite awake nor even sure of its reality. She wasn't unhappy, as Mrs. Marley believed and as Hugo feared might be the case. She liked San Salvo better every day; it seemed quite natural to be with him, and he was always devoted, thoughtful, and considerate. To him she was obviously the world's wonder; everything she did and said was perfect; his one thought in life was to make her happy. She reached and responded to this novel atmosphere; her nerves were quieted, she looked brilliantly well and entirely beautiful.

If she had only loved him—really loved him as once she had loved Rex—she felt that she would have been perfectly happy.

She turned her eyes in those days resolutely from the past and all that it held, and especially from the once beloved figure of Rex Forde. She wanted to forget it and live only in the present, giving all her thoughts to Paul, who had given her so much.

Always, however, she secretly dreaded the moment of awakening, the return of sensibility, the recrudescence of past emotion. For some days the personality of the Duchess of San Salvo must inevitably materialize and eject forever the girl who had once been Laura Rydal.

Still, the dream was never at any time an unhappy one. The spring sunshine was too brilliant, the skies too blue, the scenes too fair and the flowers too gay for that. She enjoyed the pleasant companionship of her husband—he seemed to know everything about the places through which they passed. Never had she travelled in such superlative comfort or inhabited such magnificent suites as at the hotels that afforded them temporary shelter on their journeying. She was able to realize Paul's immense wealth—it formed part of the fantastic life that was now hers. But always beyond the boundary of her guarded thoughts there was the haunting fear of a sudden and abrupt awakening.

For San Salvo, too, the honeymoon journey was a dream, but a dream of realized and unimagined happiness. He loved Laura as never before. He believed her heart to be wholly his. She was almost child-like in her enjoyment of all the beauty and novelty of the scenes through which they passed. But sometimes he felt he ought to have been more explicit and told her of his grandmother's implacable attitude towards their marriage. It was like leading her across flower-strewn ways into a trap. The constant letters he received from Rome shook his faith a little in their future peace.

His marriage embodied all the old Duchess's deepest aversions. His wife was a foreigner and a Protestant, and she was almost a stranger to him. He had been caught by a pretty face. She hadn't even money to compensate for all her other shortcomings. Not that he needed money, but he should never have been married solely for his possessions as had undoubtedly been the case. He ought to have been more on his guard. . . .

These reproaches made him purposely postpone the arrival in Rome for as long as was decently possible. The thought of the inevitable meeting between the two

women filled him with anxious apprehension. His grandmother could be, if she chose, extremely alarming; two generations had yielded to that inflexible will. What would Laura think when brought face to face with that fierce personality, that survival of a bygone period, so opposed to all innovations, so antagonistic towards all that savoured of modernity?

The days went on and he shrank more and more from the thought of preparing Laura for the inevitable meeting. Oh, from the beginning he should have taken her into his confidence, and shown a greater frankness and honesty! He began to be sorry for his wife; she didn't, in a word, know what she was in for.

They had moved south to Florence and were walking one evening amid the enchanting olive groves of Fiesole when he said suddenly:

"I'm afraid we can't put off going to Rome much longer."

"Afraid?" she echoed. "Why—don't you want to go, Paul? I'm longing to see my new home!"

"Well, it'll mean, for one thing, that our holiday's over. When we are once in Rome we shall have to take up our life seriously. I shall have no end to do. Things I ought to have attended to last winter."

Something in his tone seemed to warn her of pitfalls ahead. She said soberly: "Of course we couldn't expect this to go on forever. Still, it's been great fun, hasn't it?"

She put her hand on his arm and they stood side by side, looking down upon Florence bathed in the rose-pink mist of evening. The olives, too, were washed with that prevailing rose-color. Their neat, sharp leaves were stencilled accurately against the sky. To their left rose the blue hump of Monte Ceceri.

"Oh, it's been beautiful while it lasted," Paul agreed.

"Yes." She looked at him, sharply, nervously. "But it's still going to be beautiful, isn't it?"

"I hope so." But the new doubt was in his voice. He really, now it came to the point, hadn't the courage to tell her. And, besides, where was the use of meeting troubles half-way? She would learn all that there was to learn when she got to Rome. And if it proved too impossible, he would take her away, perhaps to the place Hugo had ironically called the Castle of Otranto.

"When shall we go?" she asked.

"I think on Monday. My grandmother wants me to get back—there's so much business still for me to do."

"Your grandmother?"

"Yes."

There was a moment's silence, then Laura said:

"Must you do what she wishes? Can't you choose your own time?"

Wasn't he his own master? Couldn't he come and go as he pleased? Why must he listen? She longed to utter these questions aloud.

"Yes, as far as possible. But I must consider her wishes too."

"Is it so necessary?"

"You forget—she was like my mother for so many years."

"I wonder what she'll think of me," said Laura.

She looked up at him, her eyes alight with mirth. But his face never lost its anxious gravity.

"I'm sure she'll like you very much indeed!"

"Oh, I do hope she will, Paul. I can't bear being with people who don't like me. It makes me feel odd and shy and sulky. Aunt Sophy has that effect on me sometimes. Do tell her to like me, please!"

"I want you in any case to try to like her," he said.

"Oh, I nearly always like people, you know."

"You mustn't mind if she's a little different from the people you've been used to. I know that lots of elderly women move with the times and keep their sympathy for youth—for modern ways and customs. But she isn't one of those. She clings to tradition. She hates change. She thinks it's always for the worse. So at first you may not find her an easy person. But later I hope you'll learn what a true friend she can be."

"You think she won't like me at first?" Her tone was less cheerful and confident.

"My grandmother isn't fond of foreigners. She isn't in the least cosmopolitan. She hardly ever mixes with the foreign colonies in Rome. She is very Italian, or, as she herself would say, very Roman."

"She'll think perhaps you oughtn't to have married me?"

Paul looked straight in front of him. The rose-colored light had faded a little now; a greyish blue dusk was darkening the scene. A mist crept over the city lying far below them, obscuring its essential features.

"Just at first there may be some feeling of that sort," he said guardedly. "Of course it will pass. She has only to see you—she'll love you as everyone does—" He stammered a little as if he found an unusual difficulty in summoning the exact English words.

"You make me feel a little afraid of your grandmother," she said lightly. "But I expect when I see her I shall only be sorry for her. I'm always sorry for old people because their life is nearly over and that must be such a horrid feeling!"

"You mustn't show her that you're afraid—or sorry," he said.

They moved on a little towards the white dusty high-road that twisted and dipped to Florence.

"Paul—you ought to have told me there would be difficulties!"

She spoke almost vehemently.

"Oh, I didn't want to frighten you off."

"Then you knew?"

"Oh, I knew right enough!"

A chill passed through her. So he had known, and he hadn't told her. Perhaps in the long run it would have made no difference, but in the days just before their engagement it would have taken only a very trivial thing to turn the scales against him. It was because he wanted her so desperately that she had yielded, and because, too, he had represented his life as impossibly lonely without her.

"I suppose we needn't see a great deal of her," she said presently, "even if we do all live in the same house?"

"Her apartment is on the first floor. What we call the *piano nobile.* I should have liked you to have it, but it would have been impossible to ask her to move upstairs. So we shall have the one just above hers, and we shall meet at meals."

"At meals? Always?"

"Certainly for the present. If it doesn't work, we must try another plan. But I'm sure she won't want to change anything."

Laura meditated upon the point. It sounded an awkward arrangement, and if she had been in love with Paul she would probably have resented the continued presence of a third and slightly hostile person. But she wasn't in love with him, and didn't in the least wish to have him to herself all day long. And a third person often relieved a strained situation. Nevertheless a chill passed through her, and she shivered almost imperceptibly as if the evening air had suddenly grown cold.

"You won't mind, will you, Laura?"

"Oh, I shan't mind in the least."

"It would have been nicer alone together. Just ourselves."

"Yes, much nicer. Especially as she's so prejudiced against foreigners."

"Try to forget I told you that. I know you'll be perfectly sweet to her."

"Is she so very devoted to you?"

"Yes. She cares for me more than anyone in the world. But I think she forgets sometimes I'm not a boy any more."

"You ought to have let her choose your wife for you," she said, laughing. "You would have been certain of her approval then."

"But that's just what I couldn't do. That's just the point, you see, where I broke away."

III

Laura hardly gave the matter another thought. In her preoccupation with the present, she resolutely refrained from looking backwards or forwards. She had a youthful confidence in things arranging themselves somehow, and she was sure that she was going to make a success of her new life. Of course she must contrive to be very, very careful. Not to run any risks. To try as far as possible to propitiate this formidable old lady who wanted things to remain as they had been in her own remote youth.

Besides, it would be rather fun to see the grave sedate Paul being treated as if he were an insubordinate boy! She felt he might lose some of his arrogance and dignity in the process, and perhaps thereby become more human.

It was only when they reached Rome one golden eve-

ning in May, that their conversation at Fiesole recurred to her like a baleful prophecy.

She was wearing a white dress, for the weather was warm, with a thin grey silk coat that reached to the hem of her skirt. On her head she wore a small close-fitting grey silk hat. Charmian had advised her to wear half-mourning; a bride, especially a young one, looked so lugubrious in black, she averred. The grey and white suited her, and San Salvo, gazing at her with secret pride, thought she looked wonderfully beautiful. Surely she must melt his grandmother's heart. Only, his own mother had also been beautiful, and the Duchess had certainly never thawed to her, and had often expressed an open dislike to the English type of beauty which Paul found so attractive.

When he was with his grandmother, he felt all his English traits arise within him as if to combat her opinions. Loyalty to his dead mother inflamed him with something of passion in those moments. He wanted to defend her who no longer needed defence. But he realized all that she had suffered, and when he thought of it now, he resolved to stand boldly between Laura and any manifestation of antagonism or disapproval.

They drove through crowded streets amid a veritable jumble of vehicles and trams. At one point a mule, giving vent to a fit of characteristic obstinacy, held up the traffic by refusing to budge an inch with a heavily laden wine-cart. Laura observed that no one, with the exception of the animal's owner, betrayed the slightest astonishment or impatience. When this obstacle had been removed, the car left the narrow street and entered the crowded Corso. It sped on in the direction of the Piazza del Popolo, where a fine obelisk lifted its slender shape to the sky.

Bearing towards the Tiber, they stopped before a tall brown palace in a quiet narrow street, away from the tram-bells, the shrill motor-horns. Nevertheless, it looked a little gloomy, tucked away there in apparent obscurity.

Laura was keenly interested, and refused to allow herself to be discouraged by the gloom. The great gates were flung open and the car entered a charming paved courtyard, where orange and lemon trees in great pots mingled with palms, azaleas, roses, and geraniums. The air was fragrant with the scent of flowers. From one of the walls a picture of the Madonna and Child looked down, its frame supported by two stalwart baroque *putti*. A lamp burned before it, and Laura, glancing up, felt that in some obscure way it was welcoming her, even blessing her as she passed across the threshold into the new life that was awaiting her.

Before the great portone of the palace a tall old man in uniform, wearing a long blue coat and a cocked hat and carrying a great staff, stood in an attitude of dignified curiosity. He seemed to Laura a highly important personage and it was difficult to believe that he was only the porter who guarded the great doors of the palazzo San Salvo.

A lift took them to the first floor.

"Is this ours?" Laura asked.

"No—I was going to take you to see my grandmother."

"Couldn't I go to our own apartment first?" she said. "I feel so dusty and dirty."

"You don't look it. And she'll be waiting to greet us."

So he had struck the key-note on what was the very threshold of their life in Rome. His grandmother! Laura stifled her resentment, assuring herself it was only natural his first thought should be for her. Her initiation had

begun; she wasn't to be permitted to forget that ancient exacting tie.

They went through several enormous and lofty anterooms, very formally furnished with high-backed antique chairs, console tables with tops of priceless marble and with mirrors above them set in ancient gilt frames. The great windows were draped in crimson damask.

Their footsteps seemed to echo as they passed rapidly through the great rooms that formed the piano nobile of the palazzo San Salvo.

Laura felt that the dream was now drawing to an end. At last she was to come into contact with realities. She would no longer be quite alone with her husband, learning every day to know and like him better. She was to come face to face with the woman who had tyrannized over him since he was six years old—the woman whose approval she despaired to win.

It was the first time she had seen Paul in his own house, in his own environment. His face was cold and stern and, yes, a trifle anxious too, as if he were about to undergo an ordeal. At that moment he seemed like a stranger to her. After all, what did she know of him? He had shown himself in the last few weeks oddly destitute of surface faults and idiosyncrasies; he was never cross or irritable, complaining or captious. He had been to her unfailingly courteous and considerate. Their sojourn together had been characterized by the most complete harmony. He appeared to have no thought beyond her comfort, welfare, and enjoyment. He had smoothed all the ways for her. But perhaps they had only been like two strangers anxious to make a favorable impression upon each other, and thus punctilious about little things. Were his real thoughts as hidden from her as hers were from him? . . .

IV

They had come to a small room at the end of a splendid suite of apartments. It was filled with a kind of green dusk, for the wooden shutters were still drawn across the windows, excluding almost all light. Laura blinked her eyes and saw a figure emerging from the shadows to greet them. She was of middle height and very spare, erect, fiery-looking, with sharp features and dark, feverish eyes. She was dressed severely in black, but Laura caught the glint of diamond ear-rings and noticed the priceless pearls at her throat. She was younger looking than Laura had imagined; there was no suggestion of the feebleness of age; she was a woman alert and strong, of keen faculties and indomitable will. Something of the energy, the inflexible obstinacy one sensed in San Salvo, but unsoftened as in his case by an irrepressible tenderness of heart.

The only sign of advancing years that Laura was able to detect in the formidable figure that confronted her was in the liberal splashes of grey that sprinkled her black abundant hair.

She kissed Paul and held out her hand to Laura with an almost royal gesture. She bestowed upon her at the same time a glance that was close, critical, scrutinizing.

"I hope you're not tired," she said in excellent English.

"Oh, not at all, thank you. You see, we've only come from Florence." Try as she would, Laura could not disguise something of the nervousness that had overtaken her. That close examination now happily at an end, had been extraordinarily disconcerting.

The Duchess motioned her to a seat. Paul stood there, watching them, his arms folded, his face oddly imperturbable. An awkward constraint had fallen upon them both, and Laura could think of nothing to say to break

the tension. Perhaps, too, safety lay in silence. She was in an undiscovered country. She discerned also that Paul was uneasy, despite the stillness of his attitude.

"Is this the first time you've been in Rome?"

"Yes."

"But you've been in Italy before?"

"Yes, with my mother. We spent last winter at La Cerva."

"La Cerva," repeated the hard voice.

Paul stirred uncomfortably. He had never informed his grandmother of Laura's presence at La Cerva. She looked at him significantly and observed trenchantly:

"Paolo is also very fond of La Cerva if one may judge by his spending so many weeks there this spring to the neglect of his other duties."

Oh, how she wished she had never lent her sanction to his taking up that appointment in England! She blamed England for everything—for his prolonged, unjustifiable absence when every claim of duty was calling aloud for his presence in Rome; above all, for the arrival here this evening of that slender, white-faced, bloodless-looking English girl dressed in the latest extravagant fashion of the day. Pretty enough, of course, and with an indefinable air of race and breeding; her voice too was admirably soft, the enunciation clear and perfect. But she was a foreigner and a Protestant—the last woman in the world for a San Salvo.

He had repeated his father's mistake, despite all the warnings she had inculcated from his earliest youth.

Paul did not speak; he wondered if this reception had chilled Laura. But even if he had prepared her, would it have made things any better? Probably it would have only put her on the defensive; she would have lost something of her calm, her beautiful simplicity.

How useless, so his thoughts ran, to bring them thus

together. They had no common meeting-place except perhaps in their love for himself. But he checked himself abruptly. Laura's love, even if it existed, wasn't strong enough to demolish such barriers as those.

"I expect you'd like to see your own apartment," said the old lady, turning to Laura. "Dinner is at half-past eight. Paolo has no doubt told you that he has his meals with me. Our morning cup of coffee we take in our own rooms. Breakfast such as you, I believe, have in England doesn't exist with us."

Laura smiled. "But you forget I've been in Italy some weeks. I'm already accustomed to your ways."

But she rose thankfully and went upstairs with Paul, leaning on his arm as they climbed the long flight of shallow marble steps. She wished they could have dined alone together, just their first evening when everything was so new and strange and slightly alarming. She murmured something of this to Paul, but he only said:

"Darling, I'm afraid it's impossible. We mustn't start off by introducing any changes. Why, this is the first time I've even had a place of my own here. Hitherto I've always lived in my grandmother's apartment in the same little rooms I had as a boy."

"I should have thought it was just the moment to change everything, Paul, dear!"

Surely the Duchess must see that, now her grandson was married, he would want to adjust things to meet the new conditions.

"I'm afraid not . . . it wouldn't be popular, as you say in England."

"She'd soon get used to it. People always do."

"But one must consider the old."

"She isn't so very old."

"She's past seventy."

Laura's heart sank. She looked so strong too—she

might well live for another fifteen or twenty years! Why, she might even survive herself and Paul. She was certainly one to cling to life with an extraordinary tenacity.

"Your father must have been very young when he married," she said, making a rapid calculation.

"Yes, he was just twenty-one. I was born in the following year."

"And your mother—how old was she?"

"Eighteen. People have told me they looked like boy and girl."

"Younger than I am," thought Laura. She was trying to picture them—their return to the old palace as bride and bridegroom. The girl perhaps feeling as strange and frightened as she had done herself, oppressed too by the gloom of those rooms with their closed shutters. The Englishwoman of whose beauty all London had raved, and whose marriage to an impoverished foreigner had been so widely and deeply deplored. Yes, they had come here, just as she and Paul had done; the old walls had gathered them in this strange suffocating gloom, heavy with the history of centuries. They too had been welcomed—if one could employ so gentle a term—by that fiery, critical personality who had received herself and Paul this evening.

V

Their own apartment was not yet finished because San Salvo had rightly judged that Laura would prefer to arrange it according to her own taste. But what furniture there was, removed from various parts of the palace in accordance with the orders he had sent from England, was old and of value. There were delicate inlaid and lacquer pieces, sixteenth-century pictures and tapestries, curtains and hangings of the rare stamped Genoese velvet.

A few costly rugs broke the shining monotony of the parquet floors.

"I told them to make it habitable. I was sure you'd like to do the rest yourself," Paul told her.

"It's lovely as it is—there's hardly anything left to do," she said, her eyes kindling, for beautiful things always appealed to her. These great lofty rooms with their immense windows set in deep embrasures were, she thought, quite perfect. They really only needed books and flowers and a few comfortable chairs and sofas to complete them. But she was resolved to make them as unlike the Duchess's salotto as possible. The whole aspect of that room had struck Laura as Spartan and destitute of all intimate touches; it had lacked, too, the severe and formal dignity of the fine ante-rooms.

"I want you to remember," Paul was saying, "that my grandmother loves me as she never loved my father. Some women are like that—they give their warmest love to the child of their child, not to the one they have borne. I do not know why, but she and my father never hit it off very well. Yet, he was her only child—she ought to have cared for him more than anyone in the world."

Laura was beginning to realize the intricacies of the situation into which destiny had thrust her.

"She's so very fond of you?" she said.

"Very fond indeed. Of course that doesn't prevent her from criticizing and disapproving. . . ."

Only a far, far greater love could have won Paul completely from that old allegiance—the kind of love indeed which she was powerless to give him. And yet she felt that because she was his wife she ought to have come first.

For, at the root of that accepted and recognized tyranny lay the love of a life. San Salvo respected them, the tyranny as well as the love, and he wished her to do

the same and to carry on the tradition of nearly thirty years. Would he be ready to sacrifice her to it? She looked at him with a vague alarm. Despite his love, he was capable of being sternly exigent, and implicitly he was telling her that she must adapt herself to existing conditions and learn to form part of the scheme of things as she found them.

"If we could only lead our lives quite apart and separate from hers, we should be ever so much happier," she thought. "But of course if she worships Paul as much as all that, she'll never allow it. I can see he's used to giving in to her—she must have terrorized him when he was little. If she doesn't like me, that'll make it all more difficult than ever."

"We shall both have to exercise a little tact," he went on, in rather a remote, meditative tone. "We've got to start our new life and get accustomed to it. Up till now it's been all amusement hasn't it?"

"Oh, I don't want amusement," she flung at him, disdaining the suggestion. "Only—I've never lived with people who didn't like me. I've an idea I shall find it rather difficult."

He was obviously patient, as one is with a tired, nervous child. But he had never seen her in quite this mood before. It was the inevitable reaction, he supposed; she was feeling depressed, as so many people do in new and unfamiliar surroundings.

She couldn't tell him she wanted desperately to be alone with him—that would have been an exaggeration of the truth, and perhaps, too, the phrase admitted of a deeper and tenderer interpretation than she desired to convey. Yet, it was what she did wish, only not for the reason he would be so anxious to imagine.

"I think I've got the conventional idea that married

people are best left to themselves. To learn to make a life ——"

"But in our case we don't need to make a life," he returned, still in that gentle tone. "It's here, you see, waiting for us. We must learn to fit in—I'm not denying it demands a certain adjustment on your part at least. As for me I'm used to it. I'm in it, as it were—I've very little to learn. You understand, don't you, darling!"

"Oh, I understand perfectly. But do try and make it as easy as you can for me. I'm bound to be rather at sea just at first."

"I'll make it as easy as I can." The magnitude of the task appalled him, and his tone was consequently uncertain. "I hope you'll always tell me if you find anything too difficult. But there isn't much I can really alter—I want you to see that, and be patient."

She made another desperate attempt.

"Sometimes when a great change has taken place it makes it possible to turn a fresh page—to alter things that one couldn't alter at any other time."

"A great change?"

"Such as your marriage—to a foreigner like myself. I think I should adjust myself more easily without a third person always looking on and criticizing, perhaps not quite kindly."

She looked at him steadily as if to see what effect her words would have upon him. She was pleading her cause, coldly, logically, yet with an insistence, an immediate urgency, that he could not misconstrue. Asking him as it were to choose between herself and his grandmother. . . . It was as if she already feared defeat—defeat at those little beringed, patrician hands, with their autocratic, significant gestures—should she ever fail to conform to the traditions of the old house.

"It's so difficult to learn one's first steps with a third

person always there. You feel such a self-conscious fool!"

San Salvo's face was a mask. He couldn't—he mustn't indeed—betray the passionate sympathy he felt for her point of view. It would savour of disloyalty. And evidently Laura was suffering from a nervous and not unnatural reaction. Perhaps her reception hadn't been quite what she expected, though she couldn't really have been frightfully sanguine about it after his brief hints and warnings. Time alone could reconcile the two women with their widely different outlooks, and perhaps the sooner the process of learning to know each other was begun, the more quickly it would be accomplished. They couldn't be expected to like each other at once; fundamentally they were as the poles apart. It wasn't probable either that his grandmother would succumb to the inherent sweetness of Laura's disposition as people almost invariably did. She distrusted that sort of thing, demanding sterner and more solid qualities. Besides, she would have disapproved of any woman who wasn't of her own choosing for him. She hadn't forgiven him for his abrupt rejection of her proposal that he should marry Estella Canelli, whom she amazingly supposed she could have moulded to her own ways so that she would have carried on the strict conservative tradition. Yet he still hoped that in their mutual devotion to himself, Laura and his grandmother might find a working basis for their common life. He drew himself up sharply at the thought. Laura's devotion—if indeed it existed—could never be of that narrow, exigent, jealous and possessive quality which his grandmother's unfailingly exhibited.

"I'm sure you'll do your best," he murmured.

"But you'll expect me always to give way to her?"

"I'm afraid that's what we've got to do."

"You mean what I've got to do."

"Oh, my dear, don't you see it's what I've been doing since I was six years old?"

"Yes, but you're not six years old now," she said, with a flicker of scorn.

He took her hand then, afraid lest his words should have sounded even remotely inconsiderate. But she didn't respond to the gesture. She saw that he wasn't prepared, even for her, to forego any of the demands of that ancient allegiance that held him so strongly. She, his wife, must fit into the uncongenial mould as best she could. Even if it hurt. . . . And it would undoubtedly have hurt, supposing she had been in love with him, demanding by right of that love to be placed first. She could not tell why this thought should seem so tinged with an incredible bitterness. Was it because she had always hoped that love would eventually come to make her marriage the perfect and complete thing it ought to have been?

She rose, unable to bear the tension any longer. She went through the library and into her own room and shut the door, winking back the tears that scalded her eyes. Paul had indicated very exactly where her duty lay, the line of conduct she was expected to adopt. And as long as that baleful, autocratic figure on the first floor remained alive she would be, as it were, under her tutelage, she would be compelled to submit to existing conditions and long-accepted traditions. It would be impossible for her to break away, unless of course she found it ultimately unbearable and broke away altogether. She vigorously repressed this mutinous thought and regained something of courage and self-control in the process. But she was haunted by the little proud gestures, the keen glance, the erect bearing, the trenchant speech of the woman who had ruled Paul's life for upwards of a quarter of a century, loving him better than the son she had borne, yet not hesitating to sacrifice him to her own caprices.

CHAPTER XII

I

THE Duchess was extremely polite to her grandson's wife at dinner that night. It was a long, wearisome meal, and Laura looked nearly as white as her dress by the time it was over.

The keen eyes glanced at the simple sleeveless gown she was wearing. Why was she dressed as if she were going to a ball? Paul should have warned her it was quite unnecessary when they were by themselves.

Besides, for any occasion it was an absurd dress for a married woman to don. It was far more suited as regards length for a little girl of twelve. The Duchess had long ago given up going out in the evening, thus she was unacquainted with the trend of fashion. It was amazing too, in her opinion, that her grandson should have married a woman with shingled hair.

She refrained from uttering such comments, but she made a mental note of them, resolving to mention them to Paul during their next private interview.

Laura was fatigued, excited, and highly nervous. She was conscious that she was playing a part, and playing it very indifferently because of that close and hostile scrutiny which she found so eminently disconcerting. She had a vision of endless meals such as this one, twice a day for years and years. . . . The very portraits on the walls seemed to gaze at her as if they too were inspecting this latest and most highly incongruous addition to the long line of duchesses of the house of San Salvo—blam-

ing her, it might be, for undertaking a rôle for which she was so inherently and obviously unsuited.

Afterwards they adjourned to the little salotto where the Duchess had first received them. It was slightly more cheerful by electric light, and with its heavy damask curtains drawn across the windows, but it felt very airless and stuffy. Laura noticed that Paul did not smoke, nor did he offer her a cigarette.

She was thankful when at about half-past ten her husband said to her:

"You must be tired after your journey. I am sure my grandmother will excuse you if you wish to go to bed."

She rose thankfully and bade them good night, leaving them alone together, not without a certain qualm. San Salvo held the door open for her; their eyes met in a glance of mutual understanding. Perhaps he thought she hadn't done so badly after all. She was conscious of a wish to please him, because, after all, he had given her a great deal, had made escape from England not only possible but easy. Did it matter so terribly what one found on the other side after such a providential deliverance as that? . . .

She must always try to remember how much she owed him. . . .

When she had gone, the Duchess said abruptly:

"She looks very delicate."

"I don't think she is. I've never heard of her being ill. But she's been through a good deal this year, what with her mother's illness and death and her own loss of home and fortune."

"She has no money?"

"Very little. About two hundred and fifty pounds a year. They were believed to be quite well off. They had a charming house in London when I first met them

last year. But I don't think Lady Rydal knew how to manage her affairs."

She gazed at him with her deep, keen, critical eyes. Delicate, very badly off, a foreigner, and a Protestant. Even if he had set his hand deliberately to the task, he could hardly have discovered a woman who combined in her own person so many insuperable disadvantages. And just because of a pretty face! At least she supposed that he considered her pretty. But all men were alike. They fell in love, and the careful education of years failed them at that critical juncture. He might have married where he chose, and he had chosen Laura Rydal. The act savoured of madness. It wasn't even as if she cared for him—that was apparent in the way she spoke to him.

"You oughtn't to have let yourself become entangled," she said. "I had always warned you against marrying a foreigner."

"I beg your pardon—it was my own doing from beginning to end. She wasn't keen about marrying me. The love was on my side."

"But there was your money," she reminded him. Was he so ignorant that he didn't even know how much wealth counted for with women?

She made a gesture of contempt as she spoke, adding: "And if she doesn't even love you——"

He smiled. "I never said that she doesn't, only that she didn't. I hope she's going to, you know. I am trying to teach her."

Just now he felt pretty confident of success. Something of tenderness, of warmth, had been apparent in her during the last few weeks, and even if he were building a tremendous hope upon a very frail foundation, he felt he could never again despair. At least he didn't bore her, and she seemed to like his companionship. She had been profoundly interested in all the sights he had been able

to show her. There had been no sign of ennui, of weariness.

"It would have been safer to make sure of it first. But probably she loves someone of her own country."

He felt a cold fear about the region of his heart. Rex's face, as he had seen it that night at Lady Symes's party, rose up before him, dark, malevolent, intriguing.

She was so near to the truth that he flinched as if an arrow had glanced by.

"I don't think so."

Surely Laura had forgotten that brief, tempestuous episode? All her feeling for Forde must have perished in face of his callous defection. No woman could have suffered so at the hands of a man and not hate him for the humiliation caused by his open perfidy.

"I expect you really know very little about her. You were attracted by a pretty face, or a face you considered pretty. You'd only known her a very short time, hadn't you?"

"Eight or nine months before we became engaged."

"Is she likely to become a Catholic?"

"She's shown no sign of it at present. But she's perfectly sympathetic—she goes to Mass with me. It must come about gradually, just like my mother's conversion. The English have a great deal of intellectual honesty—they inquire and learn before they decide. I shouldn't like to hurry her."

He thought of Laura kneeling by his side at Cerva when her heart seemed broken with grief at the death of her mother and the loss of Rex. And again during that simple marriage ceremony at Westminster Cathedral. She had seemed so spiritually united to him then.

"You must have been mad," exclaimed his grandmother bitterly.

He smiled wryly. "Love is a kind of madness."

"If you had only waited and gone away and resolved not to see her again, the attraction would have worn off."

"I doubt it. But as a matter of fact I did go away—I didn't see her for more than six months. But I never for a day forgot her."

"You are happy?"

"Very. It's absurd to ask me such a question as that."

But his gaiety failed to impress her. It was as if she felt that if he were really happy he oughtn't to be.

And if she could have seen into his heart with those lynx eyes of hers, she would have known almost better than he did that there were many things wanting to his complete happiness. He had won Laura; she was his beloved wife, but only to-night she had seemed like a stranger. Hadn't she pleaded for a life apart from his grandmother? She had asked him for things he could not give; her requests invited refusal. For the first time an element of disagreement, of bitterness, had entered into their relation.

"Of course at first she's reacting to the novel environment. She feels—as the English would say—at sea," he observed.

"I hope she isn't going to make herself disagreeable? It would be highly unfortunate for you to have a discontented wife."

"You don't know her. She has the sweetest disposition."

"You should have consulted me and asked my advice before you took this irremediable step."

"I knew you would never approve. That made me hesitate for a long time. But my mind was really made up. You couldn't have changed anything." His voice was hard, inflexible; he showed something of the San Salvo obstinacy. "I hope you will be very kind to her. She's very young—she may feel lonely here, in a foreign country, among strangers."

He was pleading for his own happiness as well as for Laura's.

"She must learn to adapt herself. Your mother did—after a time."

"My mother was always lonely here. I mean Laura to be happier than that."

He rose then and bade her good night. She embraced him coldly as if to punish him for his first gesture of independence. That sojourn in England had brought about all the mischief. It had been necessary from a financial point of view, but how disastrous were its immediate effects when viewed in retrospect! He had emancipated himself from the traditions of his house, had developed latent characteristics inherited, no doubt, from his English mother. The wife he had chosen would assist him to emphasize all those English traits. She was modern, independent, impatient of restraint.

"You might give her a hint that she needn't dress like that when we are alone. She looked as if she were going to a ball!"

"That's how women in London dress in the evening," he said stiffly.

"You like it?"

"I think it's quite a pretty fashion. Especially for anyone as young and slender as Laura."

"I thought it positively indecent. I am too old for these modern ways. Tell her not to come down to dinner dressed like that again."

"Very well." He sighed.

"You must be firm with her, and express your wishes quite clearly and see that she carries them out. As she is so young you can mould her to our ways."

He made no reply. But as he climbed the stairs to the next floor, he felt quite definitely a little sorry for himself. It seemed so impossible to reconcile these two con-

flicting elements in his life. His grandmother's attitude was tantamount to a declaration of war. She disapproved of Laura and she did not try to conceal the fact. If only Laura had made some effort to win her! But she had made none. She had sat there in her white dress looking pale and nervous and apathetic, as if she already recognized the hopelessness of the task.

"Of course we can always go away if we find it too impossible," he reflected.

But this was his home among all the houses he possessed scattered over Italy. It was here that he had been born and that his lonely repressed boyhood had been spent. He had seldom left it until he had gone to the front within a few weeks of Italy's entering the War. And after the Armistice he had worked for a few months in a bank at Turin, where the fact of his being bilingual had earned him promotion to a higher post in a London branch of the same firm. Money was scarce in those days, and his grandmother had been obliged to submit to his going. Otherwise he would certainly have had to sell some of his property, and she clung to the San Salvo acres with the tenacity of her generation. Possessions were possessions, a hereditary trust to be passed on and never lightly to be parted with.

And now that he was one of the richest men in Italy, there was no longer any need for him to sell them, nor to work in order to keep them intact. He wished he had been a poorer, more independent man, able to plan his life on the lines he preferred, able too to devote himself entirely to his wife. But this other loyalty was a tyrannical one, demanding—nay, exacting—sacrifices; he was not to be allowed to forget it. How much did he owe to this woman who had reared him—how much to Laura, love of his life? The question was still unanswered when he fell asleep.

II

Although he was busy, San Salvo found time to take Laura sight-seeing. He watched the effect of St. Peter's upon her with an eager wistfulness. And she didn't disappoint him. She was speechless at first, overwhelmed and bewildered by its majestic and grandiose beauty. But she knelt at his side before the Confession of the Apostle, and when she raised her face again, it wore a very tranquil look. She slipped her hand into his, and he felt at that moment that not only was she nearer to himself but nearer too to the Church of which he was such a devoted son.

Beyond Bernini's sumptuous and for all its size ethereal baldacchino the golden window of the Holy Spirit filled the place with a wonderful diffused light.

"You must bring me here very often," she whispered.

She seemed to surrender herself to the spiritual atmosphere drenched, as it were, with long centuries of prayer and praise.

"Whenever you like," he said.

If they could only have had their life to themselves without the presence and intervention of any third party, Paul felt that he could have won Laura to the faith. Always he assured himself that she had not very far to travel. She yielded herself almost eagerly to the spiritual impressions Rome offered her. There was nothing even remotely antagonistic in her attitude. He seemed to see her soul ready and waiting for the gift of faith. And at least here she was absorbing knowledge and deepening her already aroused sympathies with those things that were so passionately dear to him.

They were driving along the Appian Way one evening of May. Across the flat flowering plain of the Campagna they could see the beautiful Alban Hills, whose charac-

teristic profiles were delicately painted against the sky. The ruins of ancient tombs made an avenue along the road—so narrow in places and flagged still with the old worn Roman paving-stones. Their car shook violently as it travelled over that ancient causeway, rimmed with emerald turf that was starred with flowers. The frail, foamy lace of the wild parsley, the deep glowing chalices of the poppies made a garden of that erstwhile burying place.

Some of the tombs were richly decorated and the stone carving upon them had miraculously survived the passing of centuries. Others were adorned with portrait busts of the men and women who had been carried out long ago to their last resting place beneath the pines and cypresses of the Appian Way.

At last they came to the pale statue of a woman outlined against that warm green background so that she looked almost like a wraith, frail and white, that had emerged bewildered from her tomb. A young and slender woman clad in Roman garb, her body turned slightly towards Rome, her raised hand supporting her chin. The years had robbed the face of something of its calm perfection, but it was gracious, poignant, appealing, and in its loneliness pathetic. To Laura it seemed almost as if she were looking back towards the beloved city, from which death had torn her, in an agony of inappeasable nostalgia.

"Do stop a moment—I want to look at her," said Laura.

Paul gave an order to the chauffeur and the car stopped a few paces ahead of the statue. Laura alighted and, turning, walked back until she stood face to face with it. It was very still there, almost as if a sudden hush had fallen upon the country-side. Far off a lark was singing, and presently a faint rumble of wheels, a throb of machinery, made itself audible in the distance. And the

lonely figure stood there, gazing, gazing; her head turned ever towards the city of her love and of her dreams. . . .

Perhaps Rome had held for her someone that was most passionately dear. The voice, the eyes, the mouth, of one who had loved her. She must have died in the springtime of her youth. She looked so very young, so almost fiercely lonely. And through the long centuries, down "the arches of the years," she had continued as it were to look back and desire that lost love from which death had ravished her. . . .

Laura was thinking: "She must have loved Rome. It hurt her to have to die. She must have had not only to leave Rome but someone she loved. Her husband perhaps. . . . Shall I ever be like that—exiled from Rome and regretting it?"

Her face was all softened as she turned to her husband. For one moment it flashed almost painfully through her mind that it would hurt her to be separated from Paul now for any reason in the world. Although she didn't love him, she would miss him as one misses something at once familiar and dear. She, too, like that pale figure in front of her, would have found exile unendurable.

"Paul!" she said impulsively.

He was standing close to her and now he put out his arm and drew her close to him, so that she was leaning a little against his shoulder. She stood there quite passively, enjoying the contact that seemed to promise such immense and comforting security. At that moment she could only think how terrible it would be to be parted from Paul . . . even for a little while. She would be perhaps like that woman, gazing wistfully towards the scene of her happy love, her lost, irretrievable treasure, the beautiful memories of earth. . . .

Always Laura felt she would be able to look back with

joy upon that moment when she had seemed very close to Paul in spirit as well as in body.

Even the haunting figure of Rex had vanished into the shadows, leaving her alone with Paul.

She was silent on the way home, and he divined that she had passed through some emotional crisis, evoked by the figure of that woman outlined against the warm green background, with the Roman Campagna flowing about her and the grass at her feet embroidered with little brightly painted flowers.

"Would you like to go away with me, Laura, as soon as I can manage it? To the South somewhere—so that we could be by ourselves for a time?"

His voice was wistful, even urgent. He, too, had felt since their arrival in Rome the tragedy of their being so little alone together. Oh, if he could only capture and arrest the hour through which they had just passed! . . .

"I should love it. Just for a little while—to be quite free——"

He divined then something of what was in her heart. Her despair perhaps of making a success of their marriage because of the subtle antagonism of his grandmother. Laura wanted to escape from it all, to be alone with him.

Alone in their love as they had been to-day.

"I must see about it. You know, I've always wanted to visit my property at San Salvo."

Of course he knew such a suggestion would meet with the fiercest opposition. His grandmother would certainly discern his real motive for going—to satisfy his own desire to be alone with Laura for a time. A breaking away—that was how it would seem to her. Already she was afraid of Laura's influence, so secretly swayed that it would have escaped most people altogether. Yes, this woman, little more than a girl, with her look of fragility, held Paul in

the hollow of her hand. In time he would become a mere slave to her caprices; he was already drifting in that direction. That was how she regarded the situation.

Paul could guess pretty well what was in her mind. But the struggle was beginning to tell upon him. He, too, wanted to go away, to recover something of the tranquillity and happiness he and Laura had enjoyed that evening.

III

As they drove through Rome they passed a church, and, seeing the people crowding in, Paul gave an order to the chauffeur to stop.

"Will you come, Laura? There's Benediction—this is the month of Mary."

She followed him up the steps and into the church—one of the smaller and later baroque ones of Rome. It was very ornate, with a quantity of stucco decoration richly gilt. Half of the church was divided by a grille, and within there were the forms of many nuns dressed in black habits, and wearing white veils upon their heads. The altar was aglow with candles and massed with white flowers. On a high throne above it stood the Monstrance, surmounted by a great crown from which depended draperies of cloth-of-gold. The air was heavy with a strong odor of incense.

San Salvo knelt down and Laura followed his example. She left still a little excited and nervous from her experience on the Appian Way that had seemed to inaugurate a new state of things between herself and her husband. She had a wish to follow where he led, to place herself completely in his hands. And now it seemed to her that the very strength and ardor of his faith imbued her with something of belief in the Divine Presence. She had felt it before

dimly and imperfectly at Cerva, but now she was aware quite definitely of a Supernatural Power vivifying the atmosphere around her. She made no effort to resist it; she yielded herself to it without a struggle. She had always felt that faith when it did come to her would come in this wise, like a sudden fierce force that took possession of her soul whether she would or not.

She raised her eyes and glanced at the nuns, kneeling in serried rows, symphonies in black and white. These women had consecrated their lives to the worship of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. Night and day they knelt in turn before the glittering Monstrance that held the Sacred Host. For this they had voluntarily renounced home and relations and the closer human ties; they had exchanged wealth for poverty, liberty for obedience, the love of man for the love of God. All through the ages men and women had been found not only willing but eager to serve God in the hard, austere obscurity of the cloister. *"We are fools for Christ's sake . . ."* ; the words flashed through her mind.

She looked at Paul. His fine profile was raised, the head slightly tilted back, the piercing eyes fixed upon the Monstrance with its strangely shining Treasure. She felt as never before the fervor of his faith. She envied Paul because to him it was an end, "full of repose, full of replies."

She sensed the gulf that divided them; it fretted her spirit. When his adoring love grew a little cold would not he discern in her the woman of alien faith whom he should never have married?

A bell rang, and Benediction was given amid a profound and tense silence. Then the Divine Praises were recited, San Salvo's voice mingling with the rest. He rose and, slipping his arm in Laura's, drew her towards the door.

They entered the car, and on their way home he said:

"You'd never been to Benediction before? Not even in London?"

"No. I didn't understand a word."

Fearing that she might have mistaken a profound but transitory emotion for the first faint impulse of faith, she could not speak of the thoughts that had possessed her. She was afraid of disappointing him. She knew how ardently he desired that she should become a Catholic.

"Some day you'll understand—and love."

She looked at him strangely.

"How can I learn? I've no one to teach me."

"I'll lend you some books. And later you could talk to a priest."

"Don't say anything to your grandmother, Paul. I've an idea she wants it very much—she hates to feel you've married a Protestant. She disapproves of me—sometimes I think she hates me."

"You mustn't say that, Laura. She's too good a woman to hate anyone."

"She may be good, but she's very hard."

"Not always."

"You ought to have let her choose your wife for you, then you would have had peace."

"Ah, but that's just what I couldn't do," he assured her.

He was a little aghast to find that she so completely realized his grandmother's attitude, with its profound if disguised hostility. Laura's honesty made her face the situation quite squarely. Perhaps she feared that in the long run that hostility might even affect his own relation to her. He could at least show her there was little fear of that.

For although no one realized more keenly than himself the essential unwisdom of his marriage, he had never for an instant regretted it nor lost anything of his conviction

that it would eventually bestow upon him all the happiness it had so abundantly promised. He became more and more aware of the beauty of his wife's character and disposition; she possessed a sweetness and strength, a courage, that even he had hardly suspected.

Always he looked back upon that May evening as one of the happiest he had ever known. He used to wonder in later days what could have made things go so terribly awry afterwards. Whose fault was it—where did the canker lie, poisoning the fair fruit they had tasted together?

He invariably blamed himself; it was so impossible to attach any of the culpability to Laura. He had been rough and clumsy in handling a situation of supreme delicacy. Even loving her as he did, he had never realized how her soul had seemed to strain out to meet his, and he had been afraid to clasp the gift thus offered.

IV

"You have been out a long time, Paul."

"Yes. We drove along the Appian Way, and on our way home we went to Benediction."

The words framed a mere skeleton of the happenings of the afternoon.

"I think you must give up wasting your time like this. Laura can't expect you to scour the country with her."

Paul stirred uneasily. He had gone in to see his grandmother on his return, and this was her reception.

"She is beginning to be aware that you don't like her," he said; "sometimes I have even thought it was making her unhappy. Couldn't you be a little kinder to her?"

"I don't know what you mean. I have always been perfectly polite to her."

"She feels your disapproval very much."

"She's been discussing it with you? You should check anything of the kind. You shouldn't allow any criticism of your relations."

Her eyes flashed angrily.

"I don't encourage it, but she's got no one else but me—it's natural she should tell me things. I don't want to destroy her confidence."

"You aren't sure of her—that is what is the matter with you. You are afraid of her ——"

Was it true? He wondered. But he knew that he wouldn't have risked losing anything of what he had so patiently won of her beautiful confidence. He seemed to feel her leaning against his shoulder on the Appian Way, like a child seeking refuge from some imagined terror.

"I want to take her away to San Salvo for a few weeks. I have business there, you know. And June is a lovely month in the South."

"You can't possibly go there now. You have neglected everything here all these months; you'd better set your own house in order before rushing about to other places. I suppose Laura suggested this to you? She's one of these restless modern women continually seeking change. I advise you not to give in to her."

"On the contrary, I suggested it to her myself. I very much wish to show her San Salvo—it'll interest her."

"You had better wait till the autumn."

He was silent, wondering again whether it would ever be possible to reconcile the two conflicting elements that now composed his life. As he drew imperceptibly nearer to Laura, he receded further from that fiery personality that could not brook to feel any slackening of her own hold upon him. How was he to keep the peace between them? He gazed at her almost in despair. How would he tell her that he too longed for the peace and tranquillity of his old castle in the South where he could be alone with

Laura and teach her those things she was beginning to wish to know?

While he desired that happiness, he was keenly aware of the prisoning chains that fastened him to that ancient allegiance, inexorably claiming his loyalty if not his love.

When he went upstairs he said to Laura:

"Perhaps we shan't be able to go away just yet. My grandmother doesn't seem to like the idea."

Laura was gay and happy that evening; she laughed a little as she said: "She's turned her thumbs down?"

"Yes. I suppose you'd call it that!"

His tone was gloomy.

"Oh, why do you listen to her, Paul? You're not a little boy any more."

"I don't want to hurt her feelings. Already she thinks I'm slipping away."

"But of course you are. Men always do when they marry. Even mothers have to bear that."

"Yes, I suppose so. But my grandmother is very tenacious. It's difficult for me ——"

"Oh, do let's go to San Salvo, Paul! I'm longing to see it. And it would be lovely to get away again, just by ourselves."

"Yes, yes, I know. But if I find it isn't feasible, we must just give up the idea. You'll understand, won't you?"

"Oh, yes." But her face stiffened a little.

She was thinking: "He's so strong really, why should he be weak about this?"

"It would have been so perfect down there in June," said Paul regretfully.

CHAPTER XIII

I

A FEW weeks later, when the June suns were beginning to make of Rome a city of fiery heat, Paul discovered Laura reading a letter. She did not receive many communications from England, for Charmian was too busy to be a good correspondent and the aunts wrote infrequently. Laura had never had a wide circle of girl friends—her close intimacy with Lady Rydal had prevented that.

"News?" he said.

"Yes, from Charmian. I've been left quite a lot of money, Paul."

She laid the letter down on the table and sighed.

"Money!" he repeated.

He did not know why, but a vague apprehension seized him. He had never desired a rich wife. Laura's money sufficed for her clothes and petty expenses. It was enough to make her in these matters independent of him.

"Darell Hayne is dead," she said. "He had another operation and his heart failed. I'm so sorry, Paul. I was always so fond of him. You did like him too, didn't you?"

"Yes, very much. He was the only real friend I ever made in England. When I was lonely or in any difficulty I always turned to him."

"He's left me nearly all his money," said Laura, in a troubled tone. "It's a great deal—he was a rich man. He hasn't left anything to Charmian. I think she's disappointed."

Paul stared at her with something of dismay.

"How much is it?" he asked.

"Charmian thinks it'll be between thirty and forty thousand pounds. I'd no idea he had so much."

"You will be quite rich," he said. "When did he make this will?"

"Very soon after my mother died."

He was thinking: "He must have known then that she was left badly off. Perhaps he thought it might enable her to marry Forde. I wonder, though, he didn't leave it to him."

"How strange it would have been if I'd had it as a girl," she said thoughtfully.

Yes, if it had come only a few months sooner it might have altered the whole tenor of her life. For instance, it would have made the path quite easy for her marriage to Rex. She still believed that his love for her had been authentic, that lack of means had constituted the sole bar to their union. Like Paul, she wondered if Darell had originally bequeathed the money to her in order to facilitate her marriage to his cousin. But no, he had never seemed at all keen about it; hadn't he told her that Rex was a "rotter"?

Paul sat there by the open window, deep in thought. The June air was very warm, and it held a faint fragrance as of flowers. Orange-blossom, probably—there were some trees in the courtyard below. . . . He felt oddly perturbed, as if this unexpected wealth would in some manner affect his own life. Laura would be rich and independent; he didn't know that he liked the idea. Such a quixotic action of old Darell's. Paul wondered if he had been in love with Laura; he had always spoken of her with the greatest admiration and affection. Of course she had been a good deal younger, more than twenty years. Still, he must have liked her very much to leave her practically all his fortune. . . .

"What else does Charmian say?" he asked.

Laura paused for a moment and then answered in a very low voice:

"She says that Iris Chapman has broken off her engagement to Rex Forde. She's going to marry Lord Grindon."

"Really?"

"Iris told him she didn't care enough for him. Charmian says he doesn't seem to mind. He's only depressed because he's lost his job."

Her eyes were profoundly meditative. It was perhaps this item of Charmian's letter that had impressed her most deeply.

If she had waited. . . .

"I don't suppose he ever cared for her. He wanted her money!" Paul exclaimed vehemently.

The old jealousy tortured him as if with a thousand knives. He was thinking: "If all this had happened six months ago, she would never have married me. She would have married Rex. She still loves him—this is hurting her."

"I'm sure he liked her. She's very pretty, you know."

The two facts considered separately would scarcely have disturbed San Salvo, but seen thus in juxtaposition they produced within him a deep and almost unbearable unrest. He felt as if he had been the recipient of bad news. He seemed with a terrible clairvoyance to know exactly what was passing in Laura's mind. The money had come too late to change her destiny. She must be thinking of Rex; she couldn't help herself. She would have to face this new combination of facts and ask herself if she regretted her marriage.

Ah, but she was his, and if he felt triumph at the thought, he had no corresponding sense of security.

Her face bore no trace of emotion except in an in-

creased pallor. She was very calm, even, one might have said, indifferent. He sat there almost praying that she might utter some reassuring word.

But she didn't speak. From time to time she took up the letter and scanned it, as if to try by this means to discover some fresh interpretation of its content.

"I seem to have married an heiress," he said at last, with a smile that wasn't quite a success.

"Yes, but I wish Charmy had had some too. She never has enough money——"

"You've never felt the need of it?" he asked curiously.

"Not now," she answered.

"I think Hayne must have been in love with you," he said.

She flushed a little. "Oh, I'm sure he wasn't. He used to treat me like a child."

II

It was a relief when he rose and went out of the room. Of course she could see that the news had perturbed him. Why did he mind so much? Or was it the thought of Rex's recovered freedom that had annoyed him? It could make no difference to either of them now, but she felt she would rather have liked to see Rex again and hear all he had to say about it. Charmian had averred that he didn't seem to mind, so perhaps he had never really cared about Iris Chapman, had only regarded marriage with her as the easiest way of paying his innumerable debts. . . .

There had been days when she had missed Rex as a friend. He would have mocked at the old Duchess; he would have seen the ridiculous side of her; his humorous, ironical view would have helped her to bear the innumerable pin-pricks to which she was subjected from that quarter. But it was never the Rex she had loved that Laura

wished to see again. Yet it was queer to think that if she had waited, if she had exercised ever so little patience, their separation might now have been at an end. Only, she hadn't waited. She examined this thought with a close, careful attention, and found to her astonishment that she was *glad* she hadn't waited. She was happy here, building up her new life, stone by stone. She belonged to Paul . . . she had no wish to be free so as to be able to return to Rex. . . . Was she really fickle or was that old love a mere illusion, a glamour that faded abruptly as a mirage fades when one approaches it?

To distract her mind, she wrote a letter to Charmian. She avoided all mention of Rex, confining herself to comments on her newly acquired wealth. Would it be necessary for her to come to England? She had told Paul and he seemed almost as startled as she was herself—she wasn't sure that he was best pleased. She didn't think in any case she would be able to get away for more than a week or ten days; Paul simply couldn't spare the time, and of course he would never let her go without him. His grandmother didn't like him to be away for long; she had just put her foot down about a proposed trip to the Castle of Otranto! It wasn't often that Laura disclosed even this much of their intimate family life. She felt that it must all sound so strange and archaic to Charmian's modern disdainful ears.

Having finished the letter, she sent it to be posted. She tried to read, but her brain was too confused with those crowding thoughts to enable her to pay the slightest attention to her book. Circling and forever circling like mad, tumultuous birds, her thoughts always in the end returned to the only point that could hold them fixed and static. If she hadn't married in such a hurry she might, after all, have been Rex's wife. He was free, and she was rich, as it seemed to her, beyond the dreams of avarice.

Yet, her heart was full of an immense thankfulness at her own escape. She wouldn't have missed anything of her life with Paul for all the world. His kindness, the consciousness of his great love, their tranquil, beautiful hours together, the times they had knelt side by side at Mass and Benediction . . . she clung to those memories almost as if she feared that Rex would try to separate her from them. She realized now, as never before, the dawning of some emotion in her heart that belonged wholly to Paul—an emotion he alone was able to evoke. Something that made him seem so much her own that the mere thought that anything might have the power to separate them could fill her with a terror of apprehension. . . .

It was quite an hour before he reappeared.

"I've just written to Charmian to ask if it'll be necessary for me to go to Englnad," she said.

His brow contracted. "Oh, I hope it won't be."

"Should you mind so much?"

"Yes—it would be most inconvenient for me to get away just now."

"But, Paul—I travelled home from Cerva alone ——"

"That was different. You weren't my wife then."

"But if they insist? There may be things to sign."

"In that case we should have to arrange something."

"You wouldn't really let me go alone?" she persisted.

"Not to be thought of."

"Would your grandmother object?"

"I shouldn't ask her. It's a matter for me to decide."

She glimpsed then the iron will, but she didn't resent it. He did care—he wouldn't let her run the slightest risk. He was a little afraid and jealous of Rex.

Yet, she felt that had she gone to England without Paul, it would have taught her some salutary lessons; she would have come back to him with a new joy, finding him dearer after the brief separation. Surely she would be able to

see him more clearly if they were parted for a short time. She checked the thought, picturing herself starting forth upon that long journey, alone, without Paul. The loneliness of it! . . . She didn't really wish to go at all, least of all without him. Why, she never had to think of a single thing when she travelled with him. He chose the trains, took the tickets, registered the luggage, saw that she had the best seat available. . . . She had done all those things for her mother in former days. Warner had never been of the slightest use on long journeys.

"If there are papers to sign, no doubt your lawyer could bring them out here," Paul said. "That would save a lot of trouble."

He went out of the room, as if he wished to end the discussion. Laura smiled a little to herself, now that there was no one there to see her. She was quite aware that Paul didn't wish her to go to England because Rex was there and Rex was free.

He was right, perhaps. There was always to outsiders a certain risk in the meeting of two people who had once loved each other, even if they were convinced they didn't care for each other any more. A chance word or look . . . and something of that ancient ecstasy and rapture leapt into being again. Still, she would have liked to see Rex if only to show him that she bore him no ill-will and was not in any sense pining for him. She was very happy. . . . Paul was a tremendous dear . . . she had everything in the world she could possibly want. And she had really almost forgotten Rex's callous, brutal treatment of her, as well as his ungallant eagerness to turn from her to another girl who had, to use his own expression, pots of money.

Her thoughts reverted to Paul, his care of her, his fear lest she should fall under the old influences. Did he hate to think that in the future she would owe less to his bounty? Her wealth would give her complete independ-

ence. Darell ought to have altered his will after her marriage and given the money to someone less abundantly blessed with this world's goods than she was herself. For Paul, it seemed, hadn't wanted a rich wife. She had felt during their discussion that morning as if it had faintly estranged them. She would rather have foregone her legacy than have that happen, a conclusion which gave her a keen insight into her own changed attitude towards her husband. . . .

III

Startled by a sudden sound, she was astonished to see the door open to admit the erect figure of the old Duchess. It was very rarely that she paid her a morning visit; her time was generally far too much occupied; they usually met at luncheon for the first time.

Laura sprang up and offered her a chair.

"I thought I should find Paul here."

"He was here only a few minutes ago."

"Do you know what's the matter with him?"

"The matter with him?"

"Yes. When I saw him this morning he didn't seem like himself. He was restless—as if something had happened. You haven't quarrelled?"

"Oh, no—we never quarrel."

"You haven't disagreed about anything?"

"Not exactly. I did suggest I might have to go to England about this money I've been left, but he didn't like the idea, so I never pressed the point. He always has his own way."

"It's quite right that he should. He's your husband—it's your duty to obey him!"

"But I always do give in or obey, or whatever you like to call it!" Laura said, with a hint of irony in her tone.

The old lady had never before perceived this spirit in

her granddaughter-in-law, and it merely confirmed her opinion that she wasn't at all the right sort of wife for Paul. She had too much of the modern independence of spirit which was working such havoc in countless homes. Paul ought to have had a wife of her own choosing, fresh from a convent-school, accustomed to parental discipline, a sweet, malleable girl of his own race and of his own faith.

"I don't think he likes my having been left this money. It seemed to upset him." She offered this information as a possible explanation of Paul's strange humor.

"You must learn to distribute your wealth wisely. It's a great responsibility. I am, as you know, interested in countless works of *beneficenza* in Rome. When you have learned to speak our language, you might join some of my committees."

"Oh, I shall be able to give you lots for your charities. I can do that without knowing any Italian."

The old lady frowned. There seemed to be a remote suggestion of impertinence in this airy speech.

"I was just wondering how I could possibly spend it all now!" added Laura.

"Now?"

"Now that I'm married. Paul's so frightfully rich himself, and he gives me such heaps of things."

"He has his own charities."

"Yes, I know. Perhaps I shall be able to help him with them."

"You mustn't try to persuade him to go to England. He said something about it just now."

Laura recognized that she was beginning to unfold the true purpose of her visit. That was why she had called upon her at such an unusual hour.

Suddenly Laura felt an intense, almost passionate, longing to go away from the palace and from the strange,

formidable antagonistic figure sitting there in front of her—a figure of destiny, of doom: someone who stood between herself and Paul and the happy freedom they ought to have enjoyed. Now that she was beginning to realize her own love for Paul, this barrier to their complete happiness was becoming almost terrible to her.

The trend of her thoughts fascinated her. Of course she could, if need be, fight for the possession of him. She felt strong enough to demolish any obstacles that stood between them and their love. She could surely teach him to think a little less of this ancient exigent tie, now that she had awakened to the fact that after all these weeks of matrimony she had begun to love Paul with an unquestionable, an authentic affection that would brook no rivals. Nothing must ever come between them again. The shadow of Rex—a baleful, sinister shadow—had been swept away forever that morning. She saw the two men in her mental vision side by side and knew that Rex didn't count any more. Some day she would tell Paul that he need never feel afraid or jealous of him again. . . .

"I hope you will soon begin to take a little more interest in your life here," said the Duchess sternly; "you are bored, as you say in England, and you don't try to hide it. I will say this for Camilla—Paul's mother—she was never bored. She was devoted to my son—she tried in every way to adapt herself to the conditions of her life here. Of course I realize it's all new to you and perhaps very different, but you're not a child, you married my grandson with your eyes open ——"

This frontal attack was as disconcerting as it was unexpected. Laura stared at her without replying. Had Paul been complaining of her? Did he consider that she wasn't playing her part as it ought to be played? For one dreadful moment she thought she must have alienated something of Paul's love.

"I'm one of those women whom men can only love for a little while," she thought desolately, forcing back the tears that threatened to come into her eyes. Rex, like Paul, had once been very much in love with her, but after a few months he had carelessly deserted her and become engaged to another woman. Paul too . . . if Paul were beginning to find he had made a mistake. . . . She shrank from the thought. Somehow she wanted to keep his love. If that went, she felt there would be no security nor safety for her in all the world.

"Let me tell you, Paul could have married where he liked. If you want to keep your husband, you aren't going the right way to work."

She glanced sharply at the white face, the frightened eyes.

"Has Paul been complaining to you? What does he say I've done?" she questioned tremulously.

She felt her courage ebbing. In what way had she offended Paul?

"He hasn't said a word. But I have eyes in my head."

"You mean he isn't happy?"

Hitherto she had believed that her mere presence could make him happy. And they had never quarrelled. But if he didn't love her. . . .

"I could go away," she suggested pitifully.

"You could do nothing of the sort. You mustn't talk such wicked nonsense. I know you're a Protestant and that you don't hold our views of the sanctity of marriage, but you must remember that Paul is a Catholic, and he can't undo his marriage even if he wished to. Whatever you do, you are still his wife in the eyes of the Church. It is wicked to speak—even to think—of leaving him!"

Her voice held a sound of almost shrill indignation.

Laura interposed mildly:

"It was for his sake, not for mine, that I suggested it. You made me feel that he wasn't happy."

Yes, she could free herself, but she could never free Paul. And during her life in Rome she had began to appreciate the Church's teaching on the subject of marriage, its strenuous safeguarding of a sacrament which men and women were growing more and more inclined to regard with indifference and contempt. All that was spiritual in her nature had responded almost eagerly to this teaching.

"I thought he might be happier ——" she added, desolately.

Paul must surely have said something to promote this sudden and violent attack.

"Happiness is not his principal objective. He has a strong sense of duty. I have had the training of him from his earliest years—he is like my own son. My views are his views. You must respect them."

She rose and went out of the room. Laura did not even get up to open the door for her. She sat there as if she had been turned to stone. The world seemed to be disintegrating about her. It wasn't what the Duchess had said that affected her so terribly, it was this new doubt of Paul. He must have revealed something to arouse his grandmother's open and avowed hostility. It was the first time she had permitted that enmity to escape her in actual words. Something must have been said; something must have been done. Paul had betrayed her. Her coldness had frozen his love.

IV

She sent a message down by her maid to say that she had a headache and would have some luncheon in her own room. She had never before failed to put in an appearance at any meal, and she felt assured that even if

Paul didn't guess the reason, his grandmother could hardly fail to do so. It was the first time they had actually crossed swords in open conflict and Laura felt she hadn't put up any kind of fight; she had permitted herself to be crushed and conquered without striking a single blow in her own defence.

She waited in the library for Paul to come upstairs. Perhaps he would be distressed at her non-appearance; he might even have heard a garbled explanation from the Duchess. But he would surely be anxious; he would seek her out at the first opportunity.

If he would only let her go to England quite alone for just a few weeks, it would make a break, and she would return to Rome, refreshed and strong, with a new courage, a new determination to make a success of their life.

He came in at last rather hurriedly, his face perturbed and anxious.

"Oh, my darling, what's the matter?"

His arms were round her, his face was pressed to hers. Laura gave a little sob of relief. She had been tormenting herself with the thought that Paul had ceased to love her.

"Then you didn't tell her to speak to me?" she cried.

"Speak to you? What do you mean?"

"Oh, Paul—I've had such a scolding from your grandmother—and I was so afraid you'd asked her to do it!"

"My dear, dear Laura!" He was obviously aghast at the preposterous suggestion. "Why should I do such a thing?"

Laura found it easy enough to speak to him now. He was no longer formidable and terrifying; he was her lover, to soothe and cherish her. Her heart went out to him as never before.

"She almost made me think you didn't care for me any more," she murmured.

He stroked back her short strong bright hair with his hand. The caress held an infinite tenderness.

"Should you have minded so very much?" he asked, not daring to invest her words with their logical interpretation.

"But of course I should. I did depend upon that. It's seemed sometimes the only solid thing in the world."

"Laura, you were a little fool to doubt it. But you must forgive my grandmother. She's jealous—she doesn't like this other influence in my life. She's struggling for her old sovereignty. Try to bear with her. You mustn't let her come between us, you know."

She stared at him.

"But she is between us. She always has been. And I can't fight her—I've got to give in. But as long as you love me——"

"Laura, if you doubt everything in the world, never doubt that. Don't you know—can't you see, child,—how dear you are to me?"

She was sobbing now; the relief was too intense. It was as if he had lifted a great weight of terror from her heart.

"Some day, Laura, I hope you'll give me love for love."

There was an urgent entreaty in his voice as if he felt he were asking for something it would be difficult for her to give.

For a moment there was silence, and in that silence she took his hand in hers with a gesture of confidence that was infinitely reassuring.

"You must be very patient with me, Paul," she whispered.

How often in after days he was to remember those words. But he, too, wished then that they could have been alone in their love.

CHAPTER XIV

I

LAURA was motoring with her husband late one evening when the heat of the day was over. The streets were beginning to be filled with that clear blue dusk peculiar to southern cities. The lamps were not yet lit, but the shop windows were dazzlingly bright, so that the car seemed to pass slowly between avenues of illumination.

In front of them the wide space at the end of the street was filled with the gigantic marble anomaly of the National Monument. Its columns and statuary groups and decorations made a great pale patch beyond the rising ground of the Piazza Venezia. But this, too, was washed with an almost violet hue, so that it was endowed with something of the aspect of a Greek temple, strangely new and insubstantial, a fragile simulacrum of the solid stuff of ancient Greece, yet imbued by that delicious twilight with a quality of mystery and wonder that made it seem less incongruous and garish than it did in the daytime. It was as if it had already acquired, despite its dreadful newness, something of the atmosphere that belonged to the ancient city whose modern spirit it represented.

Before the ornate tomb of the Unknown Soldier, guarded by a symbolic figure of Rome, a lamp burned as before a shrine. It recalled the days when Italy had fought, not only for her own freedom but for the freedom of the world, when she had formed part of that immense, heroic brotherhood of suffering.

Crowds filled the streets. The line of cars moved slowly

along the smooth road. In the windows of the great palaces lights gleamed between the narrow slats of the wooden shutters.

A cooler air swept in from the mountains, bringing with it a faint perfume of flowers that mingled with the odors of wood-smoke. Children walked beside their parents to breathe a little fresh air after the heat of the day.

Suddenly a man stepped off the pavement just in front of San Salvo's car, that had halted for a moment in the press of traffic. His profile was turned to them as he crossed the road with a kind of indolent, arrogant ease, as if disdainful of the thronging vehicles. Laura, seeing him, held her breath. The blood seemed to leave her heart. Even in that dim light she had recognized Rex Forde.

He did not differ very conspicuously from the Italian crowd about him, indeed he was darker than many of the Romans. Of all races Italian manhood approaches most closely to English standards in the matter of clothes. Rex was slender and lithe, as are many of the young Italians, small-boned, agile, swift of movement. But there was no possibility of mistaking him. He had come to Rome. She did not attempt in that first moment of dismayed surprise to inquire what motive had brought him thither so soon after the rupture of his engagement. But when order evolved from chaos in her thoughts, she knew that he could have had but one objective. He had come to try to see her again. It might be that he had some favor to ask of her—something connected with Darell Hayne's legacy.

Her little world dropped from her. Paul, sitting beside her, all unconscious of his rival's nearness, became a phantom figure. There was only Rex, who had once loved her and now didn't love her any more. Ah, that was the thought his sudden appearance had awakened to new life, to grip her anew with savage clawing fingers. He didn't love her, but he possessed this awful power of making her

suffer, of filling her very soul with a cruel unrest just when it was learning to sink upon peace. His presence seemed to assure her of a sinister intention of using that power to her hurt.

The figure vanished out of sight, swallowed up in the throng of pedestrians whose individualism seemed to be blotted out by the gathering darkness so that they looked like a formless moving mass all colored alike and amid whom scarcely any separate entities could be discerned.

II

Instinctively she put out her hand and grasped Paul's. "Paul!"

There was terror in her voice. A nerve-storm, as sudden as it was to him inexplicable, seemed to be shaking her life to its very foundations.

"My dear child, what's the matter? We haven't run over anyone, have we? What on earth's frightened you?"

So he hadn't seen. His cool bracing tones assured her of that. But her nerves were on edge and his cool ironical tones with their hint of amusement seemed to flay her.

"Oh, nothing," she said. Her voice held a dead sound; she pulled away her hand. He didn't understand; he had felt no premonition of danger. He didn't know how close to her Rex had passed. If she had said what was in her heart, she would have cried out: "That was Rex who passed us just then! Didn't you see him? Don't let him speak to me!" Paul would instantly have lost that look of ironical amusement; his face would have stiffened as it always did at the mention of Rex; he would no longer have secretly accused her of a childish, eccentric behaviorism.

She shrank away from him into the corner of the car,

thankful that she had restrained her first impulse to blurt out the truth.

"Did anything frighten you?"

"Nothing in particular. Could we—could we—turn and go home? I think I'm tired."

Paul gave the order and the car turned in the direction of the Piazza del Popolo. Presently it entered the great cortile where the oleanders were now displaying their delicious fragile clusters of rose-pink blossoms. All round the walls were inset fragments of ancient sarcophagi; bas-reliefs more or less defaced from perhaps a long burial in Mother Earth; oddments of stone carving.

As she followed him into the lift, Laura was thankful to feel that the reason of her consternation and dismay was unguessed by him. Yet, in spite of her crowding fears, the thought of that lonely figure wandering about the streets of a strange city was not without its pathos. He would come perhaps and gaze up at the palace windows, wondering which of them was hers. Not daring to ring the bell and ask if the Duchess of San Salvo were at home.

She lay awake nearly all night, scarcely daring to move, lest she should betray her restlessness. She imposed this stillness upon her body with an effort of will that was almost superhuman. The night was very hot; she felt feverish; she longed to toss from side to side to gain a little ease for her tired limbs. She tried to believe that she was back in her own white room in the tall old house at Westminster, listening to the comforting, reassuring murmur of distant traffic. She could remember often lying awake there thinking of Rex, too happy and excited to have any wish to sleep for fear of losing the thought of him. Recalling how they had laughed and talked together, visualizing the way he spoke, the attractive trick he had of lifting his brows, and brushing his

sleek hair back with his hand. His eager voice, his young passionate eyes. The enormous zest with which he enjoyed everything. The love that had so abruptly swept her off her feet. She had thought everything about him so perfect then. He was so different from that other Rex who had coldly and brutally broken off their engagement at La Cerva. She didn't want him any more. . . . With his own hands he had destroyed all that original perfection. And yet the sight of him had made her recapture something of the old nervous restless excitement. But it had brought fear and consternation too. She wondered how she had managed to live through that dramatic moment without blurting out the truth to Paul.

. . . Paul, lying there sleeping so quietly, the profound slumber of a tired man. . . . so ignorant of her fears, her wild wandering thoughts, never dreaming of the danger that had arisen to threaten her. He had her so safely under his roof; all her goings out and comings in were known to him; he had no fears for her safety; no warning premonition had advised him of Rex's proximity.

Laura's coffee was brought to her bedside after Paul had risen and gone, as he generally did, to an early Mass. On the tray she saw an envelope of thin bluish paper addressed to her. She tore it open with trembling fingers and took out a single sheet of paper. It was from Rex Forde, asking her to meet him that morning outside the church of the Madonna of Monte Santo in the Piazza del Popolo. He wished to see her, he said, on very urgent business.

III

Paul was writing as usual after breakfast in the library when Laura came into the room ready dressed to go out.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," she said. "I hate the way

these apartments are built. Hardly any doors into the passage—all the principal rooms *en suite.*"

Her voice sounded a little fretful and husky, as if she were feeling both nervous and fatigued.

He laid down his pen.

"I admit it's awkward. Next year perhaps I'll have something done. But where are you going?"

"Oh, just for a walk!"

"But it's raining."

"Yes, but that makes it delicious. So cool——"

There was a note of irritation, of impatience in her voice. Nevertheless she was smiling; her eyes were very bright; she looked radiant, almost dazzling.

"You'll get dreadfully wet. When it does rain here it's like pouring water out of a bucket. Can't you wait a little to see if it clears?"

"I'm English. I don't mind a little rain. And I don't get enough exercise here. Last night I hardly slept. You know, I've always been accustomed to go out just as I felt inclined."

Paul got up.

"I'll come with you——"

She gave him a quick, startled glance, like a trapped bird's, he thought. But his face was so expressionless that it reassured her, and she said quickly:

"Oh, there's really no need for you to come. You'd better stay and finish your letters. You know your grandmother always says I take up too much of your time."

She gave an almost imperceptible wriggle of impatience. Whatever Rex might have to say to her, it couldn't of course be said in front of Paul. Probably he wanted money—she couldn't think of any other reason for this urgent wish to see her. No doubt he was in financial difficulties since the rupture of his engagement.

"Let Tina go with you, then, if you persist in refusing my company," he said with a smile.

The softened mood of yesterday had passed. Laura was hard, brilliant, self-willed, almost passionate, alive. Dazzling in her beauty . . . he had never seen her look quite like that before and the change disturbed him. It was as if she were on the brink of some tremendous adventure.

"Oh, I don't want Tina! She walks so slowly—she can't keep up with my British strides."

"You're really unreasonable to go out in this drenching rain. You can't have anything so very pressing to do. Send someone as your deputy——"

He gave her a piercing look as if he could see into her very heart. When Paul looked at her like that, she was afraid of him. Her manner grew a little defiant, his attitude scared her. It was just as if he suspected something.

"I can't wait. I want some fresh air. I feel cooped up here——"

"Don't stay out too long, Laura," he advised. "Remember we're lunching with the de Angelis."

"That isn't till half-past twelve. And it isn't ten yet. I shall be back ages before then."

She moved resolutely towards the door. Unreasonable! The word had touched her pride. Of course she was unreasonable, but still there were things she simply had to do—things that Paul mustn't know anything about. If only he hadn't from the first taken up that violently antagonistic attitude towards Rex, she could have confided in him and let him judge for himself whether she ought to see him or not. But she couldn't leave Rex quite in the lurch; she had that queer, half contemptuous tenderness for him which even happily married women often feel for an old lover. If he were really in any need she would of course gladly help him. And, above all, she

must induce him to leave Rome before Paul discovered his presence there. As long as he was in the place, she knew she could never have a moment's peace. It was like having a bright menacing sword hanging over one's head. She had been pursued by the thought of Rex all through that weary sleepless night. There were deep blue shadows under her eyes in consequence; she knew that she looked a perfect fright. Paul must surely have discerned, through all her brave defiance, that something was gravely amiss.

Did he suspect anything? Was that why he had made that feeble attempt to prevent her from going out alone in the rain? He might have heard some gossip—there was always lots of it afloat in Rome, a place where you could never hide anything for long. . . . Besides, people were always on the alert to discover if anything were going awry in a marriage such as hers, characterized as it naturally was by so many disparate elements . . . all that difference in years, nationality and religion. . . .

She wished now that she had been less frank about Rex in the early days of her acquaintance with Paul. He wouldn't perhaps believe her if she were to tell him how etiolated that old feeling had become. . . .

All night she had had the feeling so strongly that Rex was near, lurking somewhere in the vicinity of the palace, outside the heavily-barred portone and the great high iron gates. It might be that he was even now waiting somewhere in the street outside, watching for her to emerge.

IV

The gates swung to behind her. High up on the wall, above the inset fragments of ancient sarcophagi and scraps of stone carving, the lamp burned as always before

the picture of the Madonna and Child. Laura invariably glanced up at it as if in greeting when she came in or went out, but this morning she purposely avoided looking in that direction. She felt that she didn't want to meet those calm pictured innocent eyes. It was as if she feared to read reproach in them. It was the feeling that she was keeping something of importance—something that really mattered—from Paul that made her conscience so uneasy and restless.

The wind blew the warm heavy rain in her face. There were very few people about on that wet morning, and those she passed were hurrying as if anxious to reach their destination.

If Rex were waiting for her, he would follow at a safe distance till they were out of sight of the palace. How she hated this sense of intrigue. Why couldn't he have come openly to call upon her? Paul would have been annoyed, but at least he wouldn't have forbidden her to receive him.

She visualized Paul as she had left him just now, bending over his work, absorbed, intent, concentrated, and yet ready to set it aside in order to accompany her. She had felt a pang of compunction when she refused to listen to his earnest entreaties that she shouldn't go out in the rain. His only fear, as he unconsciously saw her departing upon the first wild and illicit adventure of her life, was the practical, primitive one lest she should get wet and catch cold! Paul . . . yes, there was something very dear about him. Something one didn't want to hurt. Something that made her feel so wonderfully brave and safe, just because she was his wife.

What would his grandmother say if she knew the purpose of her present mission? It would confirm her in her rooted conviction—if indeed confirmation were necessary—as to the complete unsuitability of Laura to occupy her

present proud position. She hadn't even endeavored, as poor Camilla had so assiduously done, to counteract those preconceived traditional prejudices as to her unworthiness by conduct that was persistently and unremittingly blameless. Camilla had never thus stolen out of the palace on an unpropitious morning to meet a man of whom her husband violently disapproved. Laura checked these uncomfortable reflections. She persuaded herself that it was absolutely necessary for her to see Rex just to ascertain if he were in any actual need, and in order also to entreat him to leave Rome before Paul should discover his presence there. She dreaded a scene between the two men. . . .

The damp chilled her although the sirocco blew warm and sickly. The roads were swimming in liquid mud, and as the motor cars and omnibuses passed her, they swung the dirty water against her thin pale silk stockings, staining them. She remembered Rex's hatred of bad weather as she hurried onward. But surely he wouldn't fail her to-day.

It would be, she felt, a salutary experience for her to regard him from the impartial, rather critical, standpoint of Paul's wife. She would see him exactly as he was, more clearly perhaps than she had ever done before.

After even a brief absence you always saw people more clearly and even a little differently; their qualities and characteristics seemed, as it were, emphasized by the separation and you could more easily detect changes of any sort in them. They often appeared either much more or much less perfect than you had mentally pictured them. Laura felt too that when she saw Rex again she would be able to gauge with a far greater accuracy the extent and depth of her feeling for Paul. It was still almost incredible to her that he should in this short space of time have taught her so completely to forget Rex. Or was it

only absence, the sense of having been bitterly deceived, that had cooled the ardor of that old love? She wasn't in the least afraid of any recrudescence of it, since she could feel now that her love for Rex had never possessed its perfect quality after their last meeting at La Cerva, when he had so brutally "chucked" her. It was true, perhaps, that only the person beloved could kill the love he or she had evoked.

But if Paul were to find out about their meeting it would be difficult to persuade him that it wasn't any surviving love for Rex that had impelled her to it. She had the feeling that if Paul were really offended, he might prove hard and unforgiving.

V

She stood for a few minutes, breathless and feeling nervous and anxious beneath the classic portico of the Madonna of Monte Santo—one of the little twin baroque churches that guard the entrance to the Corso from the Piazza del Popolo.

The wind blew her thin silken waterproof about her, chilling her unprotected ankles. She was a little late for the tryst, but Rex was later still, a fact which surely argued a lack of ardor on his part. . . . Perhaps he didn't, after all, mean to come.

Suddenly she saw him advancing towards her from the Via Babuino, with a swift, springing gait, easy, athletic, nonchalant. When he perceived her, he quickened his pace and finally ran up the steps that led to the church door.

"Laura!"

He let his bright dark eyes rest upon her with an eager challenging glance.

She met the look very squarely.

"What are you doing in Rome?"

"You needn't ask me that!"

They stood there facing each other. Both were thinking perhaps of the unforgotten past, of the words of love they had exchanged, the kisses, the beautiful endearing phrases. The wonderful days of their engagement, full of a joy they could never again recover. The first love . . . it was always different . . . it had a rarer quality . . . no later experience could ever really compare with it. When love returned to you, it was always just a little tainted with use. It had lost its first wild, beautiful, innocent freshness, even if it had acquired a new depth and profundity.

"We can't discuss it here, anyhow. Shall we go into that church?"

"Oh, no, *no!*"

She seemed to shrink in actual horror from the suggestion. Rex was genuinely puzzled.

"But why on earth not? We should at least be sheltered from the rain!"

"I never care to talk in church."

He looked at her curiously.

"But you're not a Catholic. Why should you mind?"

She was silent. Already she was conscious of the great gulf that divided them. She could never find in him the old Rex. She was changed too from the Laura he had known.

"I do mind, though," she said at last.

"They're trying to convert you, I suppose?" he said, with a faint sneer.

"I don't think so. They'd like me to be one, of course."

"Well, we can't stop here—we shall get wet through. Let's take a taxi and drive somewhere."

He hailed a passing cab, and, seizing her by the arm, attempted to drag her down the steps.

She resisted him. His touch was hateful to her.

"No—no—I don't want to drive, there isn't time. I must go back. You can say what you want to say to me here——"

His hand held her arm as if in a vice.

"Rot! You must come with me. We needn't go far. Where else in this forsaken city can we meet and talk? In the galleries you'd be certain to meet someone you know."

He pulled her towards the taxi. Some people halted near, watching them curiously, thinking perhaps it was a lover's squabble. Laura, seeing they were attracting attention, submitted and entered the cab. Rex sprang in, shut the door, and putting his head out of the window told the chauffeur to drive to Ponte Milvio.

They drove across the dripping piazza, past the obelisk guarded by four marble lionesses from whose mouths the water eternally gushed.

"Lean back, then no one'll see you," he said peremptorily. As he spoke he gave her a little impetuous push. The gesture, far more than the words, aroused a hot anger within her. She shrank away into the corner of the car.

"Rex—you must tell the man to stop—I can't go with you. If you want to see me, you must come to the palace and call on me and my husband, then we could arrange something."

He laughed unpleasantly.

"You are coming with me now, you can't help yourself. And as for calling at your palace, do you think I am a fool?"

"But I can't see you like this. Do please tell the man to turn back. I mustn't stay out any longer—I'm not going to Ponte Milvio with you."

"Yes, you are. We shall be there in ten minutes. I've got a great deal to say to you."

The car jolted over the uneven cobbles. It had passed through the People's Gate and was going swiftly along the Via Flaminia.

"If Paul could see me now!" she thought, and sickened at the idea of such a calamity as that. He would never believe that she had come against her will, that she had been a mere helpless pawn in Rex's strong hands. The ruthless speed and energy with which he had borne her off had deprived her of all means of resistance.

She trembled inwardly before the imagined cold fierce anger of Paul. . . .

All the time Rex's eyes were fixed upon her face, compelling her to look at him. She saw that even in these few months he was changed and not for the better. He looked older, more reckless, and embittered, as if things hadn't gone well with him in the interval. He was even a little shabby. She wondered if Charmian had been right in saying he hadn't cared when Iris Chapman threw him over. Perhaps, though, it was the loss of his post and salary that had affected him so adversely. He was very different from the old careless Rex who had flung her in the dust only a few months before.

"Well, have you nothing to say to me?" he asked.

"I want to know what you're doing in Rome—why you've come to disturb me!"

There was a little flame of anger in her eyes. It was impossible to feel very sorry for him when she remembered he was still capable of ruining her present happiness by his rough intrusion.

"I couldn't stand it any longer without you! I've waited for days and days in the hope of seeing you. Do you suppose I passed in front of your car last night by accident? I was determined that you should see me—I didn't

care a d——n if that dago of a husband of yours did or not. It made me mad to see him sitting there beside you."

"But, Rex—have you forgotten that when I was free you refused to marry me?"

She had recovered her self-possession. He must be made to see that if he were suffering on her account, he had only himself to blame for it. He had tried to spoil her happy youth—oh, for a little time he had indeed laid it waste!—and it was only thanks to Paul that he hadn't permanently succeeded.

"I know—I was a weak fool. I was afraid of the poverty. But I've loved you all the time, Laura. It's been hell without you—the worst hell of all when I was engaged to that other girl!"

Hell without you . . . yes, that was what you felt when you were separated from the one you loved. It was what she had felt in the beginning when she left La Cerva, until Paul's strong arms had lifted her from the dust. Hell of the blazing fire and the stinging scorpions. She shivered even now at the remembrance that could bring with it too something of shame.

He caught her hand and, despite her struggles, would not release it.

"Are you happy?" he demanded.

"Yes." The monosyllable fell passionlessly from her lips, yet he could not fail to see that she was speaking the truth. She wasn't, however, for any reason in the world, going to speak of that happiness to Rex. It was such a timid little growth at present that she felt if she were to bring it into the strong light of day it would inevitably wilt and perish. And then, wasn't it still her own cherished, timidly guarded secret?

Scenes flashed through her mind with the bewildering rapidity of a screen drama. Moving pictures in which she and Paul played the leading parts. That evening on

the Appian Way, for example, when they had stood side by side before that pale statue with the spring grass breaking into blossom at their feet, and the Roman Campagna flowing about them, a sheet of cool green and silver, and the Alban Hills in the distance, delicately drawn against the sky. Now they were kneeling side by side at Benediction . . . an hour, an atmosphere, of wonderful peace and serenity, bringing as it were a closer contact, a wiser understanding. In her feeling for Paul now she sensed a quality she could hardly analyze, but it seemed to approach a devotion, a worship, that only death could destroy, and transcended in its depth and scope any emotion she had hitherto experienced.

It was as she had expected—she was able to see Paul more clearly than ever before, now that she was actually with Rex and realized how completely her old love for him had perished. It had been succeeded by an aversion which she tried to assure herself was due to the change in him. . . .

He had lifted the veils forever from her eyes, and she knew that if by this act of folly she should forfeit her husband's love and trust the whole world would be darkened for her.

"Why did you marry him, Laura?"

"He offered me what you refused to give me. Love—his name—a home."

Her eyes held a strange look, as of one who mentally contemplates hours of unimagined happiness.

"You might have waited. You knew I couldn't marry you then. I was poor—I'd nothing to offer—you'd lost nearly all you had ——"

"Do you suppose I should have minded poverty?" she flung at him with angry vehemence. Oh, how could he have so misconstrued that passionate devotion of hers? She would have laid down her life for him . . . and he

had coolly thrown her over in order to marry another girl. He had slain the love that should have been his forever. By his own deliberate action he had set the seas between them. Paul's arms had borne her across that dark gulf to a shining haven whither Rex could never follow her.

"I should have minded it for you, though," he said. "It seems such an atrocious jest of fate that Hayne should have died now instead of a year ago when his death would really have been of some use to us! I'd always believed myself to be his heir—he'd as good as told me I was. Of course he cut up rather rough when I told him our engagement was off, though I can't imagine what else he expected. That we should wait, I suppose, till we were both old and grey and past caring for anything! He had such silly old-fashioned ideas."

She wished that his words didn't sound so deplorably vulgar. She had never noticed that tendency in Rex before, and it hurt her because, after all, he was her own countryman and she had once cared very deeply for him.

He continued in a morose resentful tone. "But what on earth possessed him to leave all his money to you I can't imagine, unless of course he was in love with you. One always suspects that when a man leaves his entire fortune to a girl! But we could have married on it and been happy ever after!"

His words jarred upon her horribly. They reduced the whole episode to such a sordid level. But Hayne's action was to him both malignant and unintelligible, a kind of retribution, he supposed, because he had been angry with him for breaking off his engagement. He remembered that Darell had called him a young blighter—if he hadn't been a lame man, he would have knocked him down for that. Who was he to judge of the private affairs of another? Now, if he had offered them an allowance to

facilitate their marriage, that would have been of some use! Rex, while pitying himself as the victim of Darell's harshness, forgot that he was already engaged to Iris Chapman when he informed him that the affair with Laura had come to an untimely end. He could only see himself as doubly bereaved, since he had lost Laura and the fortune which should have been his. Yes, he was there to-day, frustrated and a failure, stripped of everything, and the woman he might have married was in possession of rank and money and every luxury the world could offer. If he could only have believed her to be miserable despite it all, he felt that he could have borne his own situation with greater philosophy. But he could gather from Laura's words that the marriage had turned out an immense success; that not only was she happy but that she loved Paul. . . .

Yes, she had found contentment in the flesh-pots. She had a satisfied look in her eyes. Eyes never deceived you—they always betrayed the happiness or misery of their owner.

"Why didn't you marry Miss Chapman?" she asked.

She was finding it difficult for the first time in her life to talk to Rex—it was symptomatic of the immense revolution which her feeling for him had undergone. Her old capacity for easy chatter had deserted her; she felt as if she were talking to a slightly repulsive stranger.

"We never cared a d——n about each other," he answered in a morose tone, "and then she met Grindon, whom she liked much better, and who isn't quite a pauper either. I'm thankful she did chuck me—she'd have driven me mad in a week. Laura, what are we going to do?"

"I'm going home in a few minutes, I hope," she said coolly, rubbing the window and looking out upon the drenched June landscape. "It's too late to do anything

else, you know." Purposely her words held a double meaning which she hoped might not be lost upon him.

"I didn't mean that—what's the matter with you, Laura? You used to be so quick at the uptake! I suppose it comes from living in this benighted country! I meant, what are you and I going to do?"

"You are going to leave Rome this very night. You can't possibly stay here. It's certain to get to Paul's ears, and that'll mean trouble for me too. In Rome you can never hide anything."

"Are you in such a funk of him? Laura—you *have* changed—you usedn't to be afraid of anything or anyone."

A faint flush colored her face. "I'm not in the least afraid—but I don't want to displease him."

"Laura—Laura—don't go back to him! He was never worthy to wipe the dust from your shoes! Let's go away together now—you and me. We can live on Darell's money ——"

She felt the indecency of the latter suggestion to be almost greater than the preposterous one that she should run away with him.

"You must be perfectly mad," she said, "do you think I'd leave my husband for you? Please tell the man to stop and let me get out. I won't stay with you. I'll find my own way home."

"No—no—I've got heaps to say to you. Don't be a fool. We may never have another chance of seeing each other."

The adventure upon which she had embarked so lightly was assuming a more serious aspect. She was a little afraid of Rex in this wild undisciplined mood. He seemed to love her and to be suffering on account of that love, and yet she felt morally convinced that only the knowledge of Darell's legacy had brought him to Rome, filled with the forlorn but incredible hope that she would yet throw in

her life with his. He even tried to persuade her that he had always loved her, and that nothing but the stress of unhappy circumstances had parted them.

"He can get a divorce. Come with me, Laura. We'll drive on till we come to a station and then go on to Florence or somewhere. It isn't as if you could possibly care for this man—Charmian told me she was afraid you didn't care a hang about him, but she didn't see how you could have refused such an advantageous offer—she was in a mortal terror lest you should jib at the last moment! And now it's easy to see you're afraid of him. Come back with me to London—we can start a fresh page there ——"

"Rex—let me go, please. It's wicked of you to talk like this—I never want to see you again. And I'm not afraid of Paul in the way you mean. I do care for him ——"

It was the first time she had ever openly admitted the fact, but the words, uttered in a panic of terror, seemed to imbue it with a more definite value. Her love for Paul had been a thing of very gradual growth, the knowledge of it had come to her almost imperceptibly and as it were unawares. But to make confession of it to Rex, who of all people surely had the least claim of anyone to hear it, seemed almost an outrage. It was something she should have kept for Paul alone.

But would she ever be able to make confession of it to him now? If he could see her driving with Rex, listening albeit against her will to his passionate words, wouldn't he be justified in believing that her old love had triumphed and that she was pursuing a secret intrigue with her quondam fiancé? Surely his own devotion would perish in the face of such a disaster. Yet, he had told her only a few days ago that if she doubted everything else in the world, she must never doubt his love for her.

She sat there, bewildered. It was horrible to be there

alone with Rex sitting so close to him that when the vehicle lurched on that rough road she was flung violently against him.

She hated him, and once she had loved him to the destruction of all her peace of mind.

VI

They passed the little fifteenth-century chapel of St. Andrew that stood close to the road on the spot where Pius II had met Cardinal Bessarion returning from the Peloponnese with the head of the saint. Behind it, in the cemetery, a statue of St. Andrew could be seen carrying his cross and surrounded by tall plume-like cypress-trees. Now they were nearing the bridge guarded on each side by tall baroque statues, one of the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady and the other of St. John Nepomucene. They crossed the Tiber, and the chauffeur drew up before a garage in the piazza beyond, indicating that it was necessary to stop and buy some petrol. Laura took the opportunity of leaving the car; she descended with a sigh of relief, inwardly resolving that nothing would induce her to enter it again.

She walked along the road to the right. It was heavily shaded by an avenue of thick plane-trees whose branches met above her head. She was close to the river and the grey current swirled past her, swollen from the recent deluges of rain. The grass was damp and sodden; there were enormous puddles in the road, and the trees in their full summer foliage dripped moisture. A tram followed the grey curve of the river. And leaning against the massed clouds, above the pale line of distant houses, she could see the Dome of St. Peter's in all its silver wonder watching over the city.

As Laura looked towards it now she felt almost as if it

possessed a reproachful, accusing personality. It stood for something that all these weeks had been slowly informing her mind with new standards and ideals. A rock, against which the tempests and storms must beat in vain. It seemed to offer something permanent, immovable, amid the shifting sands of fortune.

As she stood there gazing at it she heard footsteps beside her and saw that Rex had followed her. Oh, she had no right to be here, alone with him; she had been mad to come even this little way with him! He was so close to her that if she moved his arm touched hers.

If Paul heard of it . . . and how could she hide that day's happenings from him? She concentrated her thoughts determinedly upon him, and upon those significant occasions when she had felt a spiritual nearness to him that transcended any physical proximity, when she had felt, indeed, as if they had been surrounded by a wonderful common atmosphere of light and understanding. She realized profoundly all that she owed to him of this new perfect life in which her soul had room to grow. She was guarded and sheltered, she was loved and considered, as she had never been before. And even if she had still loved Rex as once she had loved him, she knew that she could never have left Paul to go to him. Apart from any question of morality, such a step would have been impossible. She could even be glad that she had seen Rex again so clearly, so relentlessly, thus destroying forever the picture her heart had retained of him. It was smudged and blotted now, its beauty had perished. She could look back upon her own feeling for him with a sense of horror, of dismayed astonishment. It was incredible that for so many months she should have permitted the memory of Rex to prevent her from giving Paul that full, perfect love which was so incontestably his due. . . .

Rex, who had chained her, had himself set her free. No other hand but his could have accomplished it. She liked to think that when she returned home that day and encountered Paul it would be with the knowledge that, heart and soul, she belonged utterly to him.

VII

They stood gazing at the Dome, so dim now in the driving rain that it seemed one with the clouds.

Rex broke the silence.

"Laura—Laura—I can't live without you. . . ."

He came so near to her that their arms touched, and his hand clasped hers so tightly that she could not draw it away. There was no one about and but little chance of their being seen by anyone who knew her by sight; still, she had the feeling that they were being watched by the whole world.

Presently a little car passed swiftly along the road. It was a two-seater, driven by a man with a woman sitting beside him. She turned her head sharply and gave Laura a quick scrutinizing look almost as if she recognized her. Laura felt with a kind of dismay that the face was familiar to her. She had seen so many strangers since she came to Rome—for she had been punctiliously introduced to all the innumerable relations and friends who were tolerated by the old Duchess—that it would have been quite impossible for her to remember them all. She dragged her hand away with a fierce, passionate gesture. Supposing that woman had really recognized her! . . . She knew now that she was definitely afraid of Rex, because he was capable of destroying her happiness. Paul would certainly question her as to the reason of her long absence that morning. It was the first time she had spent so many hours away from the house alone. She

could hardly help being late for the luncheon party which was being given in her honor. And what excuse could she possibly offer for her lateness, her unpunctuality? If she were to tell him she had spent the morning with Rex—the man whom Paul had always disliked and distrusted—there might even be a scene.

Yet, if Paul could only know the truth, his old jealousy of Rex would surely vanish forever. If she could only tell him that the Rex she had once loved was dead, and that in his place there was only this hateful stranger who had sought her out again because she was a rich woman! . . . She had learnt her lesson at last, but it might be that she had paid too high a price for it. She ought never to have left the house to-day with the express purpose of meeting him. It was in itself an act of subtle disloyalty to Paul. What would they think of her now—Paul and his grandmother—if they could see her now so far from Rome, talking to Rex in apparently earnest and intimate colloquy?

"You should have thought of that before," she said at last, in a cold, scornful tone. "Last spring I would have married you—I'd promised to and after my mother's death there was no obstacle except that we had so little money. You knew that I cared for you then very much indeed, and I would have married you in spite of it. I never wanted money." Her eyes were fixed accusingly upon his face. "You came and killed my love. I can never care for you again—you've made me hate you, Rex; I know it sounds a dreadful thing to say, but you deserve to hear it. I can't even feel sorry for you because you've made such a mess of your life. You've never really cared for me, and your coming here was a frightful mistake. I hope you'll go away at once and not hang about trying to see me. I'm not going to *let* you spoil my life!"

Her voice trembled a little with suppressed passion. As he listened a bitter scornful expression came over his face.

"Do you really think I believe a word of all that, Laura? You've never cared about this man, and I'll swear you loved me up till the time of your mother's death. How can you—a free Englishwoman—be happy there in that great prison-palace with its barred windows and guarded doors? You're watched and watched—you're hardly allowed out by yourself. That grandmother of San Salvo's bullies you—I've heard all about it since I came here. San Salvo isn't without his enemies—he's a hard master to serve. You're too free a spirit to endure such restraint. I love you far more than he can ever love you—we should be free and happy together as the day is long. No one will blame you for leaving him, because no one ever imagined the marriage would prove a success or thought you meant to stick to him. Even Darell was afraid——"

She had turned a little from him, and her eyes rested upon the blue, graceful line of hills that flowed northward from Monte Mario, garmented with trees. On a spur of one of the lower slopes the old Villa Madama was visible, grey against the background of green. Here and there amid the patches of pastureland the fiery gold of the gorse flashed with a strange brightness.

"I'm sure that's why he left you all his money and didn't alter his will after your marriage. He knew it wouldn't work, and he wanted you to be independent of San Salvo. That's the only construction I can put upon it. Your marriage was never meant to last. You ought to be in your own country among your own people. It wasn't possible last spring, but it *is* possible now!"

She faced him now, her eyes full of amazement.

"Do you really think I'd leave Paul for you even if

I were unhappy, which I'm not? I've never been so happy as I am now. I wouldn't give up my life here if I could."

She turned away abruptly and ran rapidly down the road. So sudden was this gesture that for a moment he didn't follow her. When he did so she had already reached the bridge, and he saw her leap upon a passing tram as if she were escaping from some proximate danger. The tram moved across the bridge and then gathering speed went quickly in the direction of Rome. Rex sulkily turned to the piazza where the taxi was awaiting him. The driver, imagining that the couple would not immediately return from their walk—only the English were mad enough to take a constitutional on such a day!—had seized the opportunity of regaling himself at an *osteria,* from the depths of which he was presently exhumed. Rex jumped into the car and told him to drive back to Rome as quickly as possible. He would certainly reach the Piazza del Popolo before Laura; he would wait for her there . . . little devil, to leave him in the lurch like that! . . . His mind was in confusion as the taxi sped along the wide Flaminian Way, bordered almost continuously by huge modern buildings and blocks of flats.

Was it really true that he had lost her as completely as her words had seemed to suggest? She had sunk into the ease and luxury of her new life so that now she desired nothing else. That was his reading of the incredible change that had taken place in her. Money, luxury, and jewels—that was what a woman really wanted, and Paul—curse him!—had been able to give her all that! She actually pretended to care for him. No woman was really invulnerable to the lure of wealth. . . . Still it was difficult to believe it of Laura who had never been worldly in the sense that Charmian was worldly.

VIII

Even now he couldn't envisage ultimate defeat. Laura was in possession of the money that should have been his—Darell's money. She was so rich now that she had absolutely no need of it; she didn't even want it as a means of regaining her freedom. Darell had acted perfidiously in not making him his heir. If he had only had that money he would never have troubled his head about Laura San Salvo again. He had the feeling that he had been doubly cheated.

But he was only deceiving himself. He did love her, more than ever before. She was so different from the rather shy, timid girl he had seen in dutiful attendance on her mother, so different too from the Laura who had received in cold, stoical silence the declaration of his own perfidy at La Cerva. Oh, she had cared then—she had admitted that much to-day—he had been a fool ever to let her go. . . .

How beautiful she was now . . . so alive, so wonderful, with a radiance she had never possessed in the old days. Her shining, happy eyes, the delicious color that came and went in her fair, sensitive face. . . . She possessed a new dignity and poise that lent her an added attraction. Mere wealth and the consciousness of worldly success and of a great position couldn't of themselves have wrought this marvellous change in her. No woman who wasn't beloved and happy could look like that. She was happy; she hadn't lied when she told him so. . . .

There was no sign of her when he descended from the car in the Piazza del Popolo. He paid the driver and stood in the pouring rain at the corner of the Ripetta, where the trams from Ponte Milvio stopped. The wet cobblestones were shining, and the obelisk stood up like some fantastic pillar darkened with moisture. The scene

was gloomy and depressing, more like London than Rome.

When he had waited there for half an hour he was obliged to confess himself defeated. The trams followed one another in quick succession, disgorging their human freight. He stared at the descending passengers with a kind of angry anxiety. Laura had given him the slip; she had really eluded him with considerable dexterity, dashing off like that before he could stop her and disappearing into a tram.

He went back to the hotel. Perhaps it would be safer to follow her advice and leave Rome without trying to see her again. His finances were also at a low ebb, and he would have to seek some cheaper place than Rome, where prices, so he was assured, were continually soaring.

The initial failure was discouraging, but he didn't mean to regard it as final.

CHAPTER XV

I

LAURA left the tram about half-way down the Via Flaminia, some minutes after she had seen Rex whisk by in the taxi. She hailed a passing carrozzella and drove back to the palace, sheltered from observation by the big black hood. Still she had a sense of intense relief when the Piazza del Popolo was safely behind her; for it was surely there that Rex would wait, in the hope of having a last word with her.

She looked rather a pitiable object when the iron gates of the palace swung open to receive her. Her shoes were soaked and muddy from the walk along the Tiber. Her stockings and skirt were splashed and her hair fell in untidy wisps about her face. She felt chilled and nervous and agitated. As she entered the courtyard the porter saluted her, but her uneasy conscience invested his glance with a suspicious critical scrutiny. He was wondering perhaps what she had been doing out in the rain alone. Probably he would attribute her eccentric conduct to the proverbial madness of the English nation. Laura was excessively sensitive to criticism, and, besides, she was convinced that to return thus, wet, bedraggled, and muddy, could hardly be regarded as *signorile* in the country of her adoption.

She was very late too, and she could not possibly be ready in time for that horrible luncheon-party. Paul would be annoyed, perhaps he would question her as to what could have detained her on such an unfavorable

morning, especially when she knew she had an important engagement.

To go to her bedroom she had to pass through the library, an inconvenience which she could never remember resenting until to-day. But she hoped that Paul might have gone to his room to dress.

She opened the door, and he sprang up from an armchair. A look of relief came into his face.

"My dear child, where on earth have you been?"

"I've been out, Paul."

He gazed at her with a slight but definite astonishment. She was very pale and her expression was nervous and almost frightened, but her eyes were shining like stars. Her little gestures and movements seemed to point to some secret agitation.

His eyes travelled slowly down from the untidy wisps of hair to the wet shoes, the pale silk stockings splashed with dark, disfiguring mud-stains. He had never seen her so dishevelled before, and a vague, formless apprehension possessed his mind.

Laura stood before him feeling almost transfixed with fear, although she was careless and defiant in her outward demeanor. San Salvo looked so big and strong and powerful; he was capable, she felt, of thrashing Rex within an inch of his life. Supposing he should ever discover the truth about her morning's adventure? Supposing Rex's presence should somehow become known to him? Hadn't she herself said that it was impossible to hide anything in Rome?

"So I see." His voice was incredibly dry. "And you're wet through. Did you forget about the de Angelis' luncheon party? I am afraid we shall be very late."

"I'll go and get ready," she muttered, passing him swiftly with her face involuntarily averted. How absurd to feel so guilty and more like a pariah than an innocent

woman! But if he knew how she had spent her morning would it not destroy something of his love for her? He would regard her as false, perfidious, disloyal. She would forfeit his good opinion, his confidence; it would be difficult to explain things to him in a plausible manner. He would begin to believe that his grandmother's hostile opinion of her was amply justified. In this knowledge lay the sharpest sting of all. She felt the shame not only to herself personally but also in her quality of Englishwoman. She would be weighed in their scrupulous balance and found wanting. They would believe perhaps that she had been carrying on a secret intrigue with Rex under their very eyes.

Oh, if she could only be certain that Paul loved her still as he had done in the beginning and as Rex loved her now! But his cold reception of her had been, to say the least, discouraging and had emphasized her overwrought nervous state. Once she had felt so assured of his love, had believed too in its deathless quality. But now she wondered whether it had not been killed by her own coolness. Hadn't Charmian assured her that there was a breaking point with men? . . .

She hated Rex the more because his action that day might prove to have lasting consequences; it could conceivably separate her from Paul, robbing her of his love and trust.

II

She never knew how that interminable day passed. The luncheon party was like a dream, and she wondered afterwards whether she had talked sense to the agreeable young French attaché who sat next her at table and looked with obvious admiration at her charming fair face. She was thankful when the time came to leave. Paul asked

her if she wished to go for a drive in Campagna as the afternoon had surprisingly proved fine. But she shook her head and told him she was tired and preferred to return straight home.

All the rest of the afternoon she sat in the library, reading and knitting, relieved when Paul left her alone and yet strangely glad when he came back. His presence was a protection and dispelled her uneasy thoughts. She wished she had the courage to tell him everything, but she feared his anger too much. The rare, terrifying anger of a habitually controlled man . . . it was an unknown quantity to her and yet she knew it was there, ready to leap out, especially if his jealousy were aroused.

Rex had foolishly supposed she would need but little inducement to leave Paul; his opinion of the sanctity and permanence of marriage was obviously negligible. She tried to imagine that future, supposing she had been willing to go with him. It was like a child's game of pretence, but at least it served to distract her. There would be the elopement, the scandal it would cause in Rome and even in London; the hideous blow to Paul's pride even it it failed to wound his heart; the return to England; the divorce, supposing Paul could legally give her back her freedom, a point upon which she was by no means sure. But no legal process could ever set him free, because he was a Catholic. Then perhaps Rex would marry her. Easy enough for people who had never been taught to regard marriage as a binding contract, much less as a Sacrament. Soon she would regain, except in very strict, old-fashioned circles, her former position in society. People would say it hadn't been her fault; she was too young, and then you never knew where you were with foreigners; some of them would even congratulate her on her courage, assuring her she had done the only right thing. Immorality had its cant, specious, plausible,

alluring; the kind of cant that said it was immoral to go on living with your husband when you didn't care for him any more. But since her marriage to Paul she had imperceptibly absorbed the views of the Catholic Church on the subject of the sanctity of marriage. She was profoundly influenced too by the fact that she had been married in a Catholic church, and by so doing had acquiesced in those changeless, perfect laws that she imposed upon her children. Laura knew that even if she had discovered that her old love for Rex Forde had remained unaltered, she would still have refused to leave Paul and go to him. She would have realized not only the hurt to Paul's life but to her own soul. . . .

Only, she hadn't cared for Rex any more. He had seemed to her entirely worthless. She could hardly pity him, but shrank from him as from some low, creeping thing. They seemed no longer to have any common meeting ground. She wondered if her mother had always seen Rex as she saw him now.

III

When she went down to dinner that night, dreading the meal more than usual, she was conscious that the Duchess bestowed upon her a keen, searching look. Almost as if she knew something. . . . Laura felt inclined to scream. The sudden scrutiny, the stab of her uneasy conscience, reacted violently upon her nervous system. This dining *en famille* was surely one of the minor ordeals from which Paul could have saved her by a little quiet insistence and forethought. She wished she could have dined alone with him to-night; she pictured herself laughing and talking and amusing him as she had often done on their honeymoon.

But his grandmother's presence checked any desire on

her part to talk nonsense to him; she simply wouldn't have understood it—would have thought her childish and undignified.

Paul spoke chiefly of public happenings, the latest local events, the recent doings and pronouncements of *il duce*. Sometimes the old lady would violently disagree with him; her dark, stormy eyes flashed fire; she rebuked him as if he had been a child, for holding views that differed from her own. Then he would smile half apologetically, and change the subject. Always he tried to soothe her ruffled humor. But Laura felt that he must hate it almost as much as she did herself. Only, he was bound by the tyranny of the tribal instinct, so strong still in Latin countries.

She sat between them, silent as a child is silent in the presence of its elders. If they only knew. . . . But luckily they could not know. She had come and gone practically unobserved. Yet it was extraordinary how guilty one could feel when one was technically quite innocent! . . .

IV

Suddenly the Duchess turned to her and said in an abrupt tone:

"You didn't go to Ponte Milvio, did you, this morning?"

Laura's heart stopped beating. She glanced at Paul, but he didn't look at her. She thought he was purposely averting his gaze from her. Was the question a surprise to him? For a moment she didn't even try to answer it. The room seemed to spin about her. The shaded electric candles on the table became glittering pyramids of flame, blinding her.

She said at last: "What *do* you mean?"

Paul drew a deep breath as of relief. Yet she hadn't really lied. They frightened her, these cold, stern people.

"Someone told me they saw you walking by the river with a man. Of course I knew it must be a mistake although you do rush about alone in this extraordinary way."

The dark eyes seemed to pierce her. Laura did not speak. Far better leave it at that, then they could believe the report or not just as they liked.

So she had been seen. Did they watch her? Now she remembered the trivial episode of the car passing them as they walked along by the riverside, under the avenue of dripping plane-trees. The woman had certainly turned and stared at her with a look of recognition. Laura had an impulse then to blurt out the whole truth and watch its effect upon them with a kind of morose defiance. It perished as she glanced at Paul's controlled face.

He showed, however, that if suspicious he could still be merciful, for when dessert had been handed and Laura had refused it he said:

"You're looking tired. Perhaps you're feeling the sirocco. Wouldn't you like to go upstairs now?"

She rose, thankful to clutch at the escape thus offered.

"Yes, I'm tired. I should like to go."

She rose wearily, her aspect was almost drooping. She gave her hand to the Duchess, wishing her good night, then she trailed out of the room. She mustn't hurry—that would betray her eagerness to leave them. She went so quietly it might have been a wraith vanishing.

As Paul closed the door she was wondering what they would say about her, now that she was out of the room. Whether they would discuss the matter further.

The old lady looked at her grandson and said:

"You see, I was right, Paul. She didn't attempt to deny it. You thought me unjust, but I know more about

women than you do. She is going to bring disgrace upon your name."

"Never while I'm alive to prevent it. And we don't know anything for certain. Estella may have been mistaken."

"She seldom makes mistakes. She has the eyes of a lynx. Besides, Laura is very conspicuous with that bright hair. You must find out who this man is. Some English lover probably. You'll have to be careful, my dear. A woman always at heart prefers the men of her own nation."

He winced slightly at those words, "some English lover."

"I don't wish to discuss it. She probably saw no harm in it. In England women have a wide liberty."

"And how does it end? In the divorce court! I've read the statistics—they are appalling."

He stirred uncomfortably, thinking, "Of course it was Forde. He's the only man she knows at all well. And now she has Hayne's money——"

Yes, it might even be that he was attempting to win her back on the strength of that legacy. When Paul thought of Rex, he subdued his anger with an effort that seemed to exhaust him physically. Why should Laura have gone out thus, eagerly, impatiently, to meet him, unless she still loved him? No other motive could have impelled her, and he faced the bitter truth with a certain courage.

To-day there had seemed a subtle change in her. Something hostile and defiant in her manner when she had insisted upon starting out in the rain alone. He recalled the desperate purpose in her face with a misgiving that struck at the very roots of his happiness and peace of mind. Later she had been seen walking with a man by the Tiber, near Ponte Milvio. Estella Canelli, whose

mother was an intimate friend of the old Duchess, had seen and recognized her. It wasn't easy to mistake Laura. . . . There was something so individual about the way she moved and held her head.

"I don't wish her to know that we suspect anything. She's such a child—I could swear she meant no harm," he got out at last.

The Duchess was silent. She could see that, for all his pretended unconcern, he was deeply agitated and perplexed. She thought too that probably he knew the name of this man with whom his wife had been seen. But of course it would be too much to expect him to divulge it.

Before he rejoined Laura upstairs, Paul went to the telephone and rang up a friend of his who could obtain information from the Questura more easily than he was able to do himself. He wanted to know, he told him, if there was an Englishman of the name of Reginald Forde staying in Rome and if so at what hotel.

In the morning he would learn the exact truth. But in the meantime he must go up and see Laura. His heart was heavy at the thought that she was keeping even an innocent secret from him.

When he entered the library she was sitting working by the light of an electric lamp that stood on the table near her. She looked very young, almost a child. He didn't in the least want to force a confession from her, to rush her defences by brutal, angry words such as he felt rising to his lips. For he was at fault too; it was he who had placed her in a position she was beginning to find intolerable. Hadn't he persuaded her to marry him in the face of her frank avowal that she loved another man? She had told him that she could give him nothing in return for his own great love; over and over again she had indicated to him her own inherent unsuitability to be his wife. And now he was reaping the harvest

of his rash folly. He had been altogether too vain and complacent in his belief that he could teach her to forget Rex, that in their new life together he would be able to win all her love for himself. So he mustn't blame her or reproach her. He had set her too tough a task, and now his only course was to save her from Rex. Oh, if he blamed anyone for the situation that had arisen it must surely be himself! . . .

He went up to her.

"Laura," he said.

His voice held a strange tenderness that unnerved her. He wanted her confidence. She mustn't hide this dark, menacing danger from him. That one word had been in the nature of an appeal.

"If I weren't so frightened I'd tell him," she thought, "but it's impossible . . . there's his grandmother . . . she'd make mischief. She'd never believe me—she wouldn't let him believe me—"

"What is it, Paul?"

She raised her eyes, surveying him with a quick, frightened look. But her voice sounded cold and indifferent.

"I'm very sorry my grandmother spoke to you like that this evening."

"Oh, it doesn't matter—I really don't mind. But I do rather hate being disliked. No one has ever disliked me quite so violently before." She felt there was safety in this side issue.

"You must forgive her. She doesn't understand English ways."

He took up a book and didn't speak again. For the rest of the evening he sat there reading, apparently engrossed in his book; but in reality his thoughts were exclusively concentrated upon Laura.

She didn't love him, after all, and lately he had had such wild, fantastic dreams and hopes that she was learn-

ing to do so. Now he felt that she must almost hate him because he was standing between her and Rex.

"I wronged her—it's my fault," he thought desolately.

He longed to go across the room to where she was sitting, working with a kind of frozen attention, and say something that would melt the icy barrier that seemed to have reared itself between them. If he had followed his own eager impulse he might then and there have learned the truth that would have set all his fears at rest. But the mere thought of putting his cards on the table and of reasoning with her in such a way that the very force of his love must at least urge her to pause in any resolution she might have made, seemed to him too stupendous a task. She was still too fresh from that meeting with Rex! He remembered how she had looked that morning when she started forth on her walk, so alive, so dazzlingly beautiful, just as if she were about to embark upon a tremendous adventure. His heart sank. She had known she was going to see Rex; she had been afraid perhaps that he would delay or detain her.

He ought never to have married her when she was still so deeply wounded by Forde's defection. He ought to have waited. . . . But if he had waited she would never have been his wife. Hayne's legacy would have facilitated her marriage to Rex. Yes, by this time she might have been Rex's wife. She was aware of it; she saw perhaps the ghastliness of her own mistake; she was suffering from that sense of baffled frustration.

Oh, he was ready to accept all the responsibility, all the blame! She had been too young and inexperienced to cope with the experiment he had thrust upon her. And he had done it with his eyes open; from the first she had been quite frank with him. Yet he had believed that by removing her from her former surroundings he could teach her to forget all that had so cruelly hurt her. The

possibility of Rex's seeking her out in Rome—an unmarried, disengaged Rex—had never occurred to him. Nor had he ever imagined that Laura would suddenly become financially independent of him. All these untoward circumstances had combined to bring about the present difficult situation with its almost inexhaustible, sinister possibilities.

He set his lips in a hard, firm line. It was his duty to save her from the peril that menaced her. Probably he might incur her hate, and it might even be that despite all his efforts she would break free.

Oh, Rex should never be allowed to ruin Laura's white, beautiful soul! He would stand between her and such a calamity as that. He could hardly hope to convert her now, and lately she had seemed to be drawing perceptibly nearer to the Catholic Church. This new development would certainly drive her in the opposite direction; she would be impatient of its fixed laws, its restraints and inhibitions.

Suddenly she rose and went towards the door as if subconsciously she was aware of his thoughts concerning her, and was unable to endure the tension any longer. Looking over her shoulder she said carelessly:

"Good night, Paul."

"Good night, Laura."

He let her go without another word. The shadow of Rex stood between them.

V

In the morning Paul received word from his friend that a young Englishman called Reginald Forde had registered his arrival about a week ago at one of the smaller hotels in the centre of the city, near the Pantheon.

It was exactly what he had expected to hear, for he had

never, alas, been able to persuade himself that there had been no foundation for Estella's succinct and positive story. There was no longer any room for doubt that Rex was in Rome, and given the unusual circumstance of Laura's long absence from the house on the previous day it was equally certain that she must have spent a considerable part of that time in his company. They had been seen together as far afield as Ponte Milvio, walking beside the Tiber in the rain. When charged with it she hadn't attempted to deny it; she had made only an evasive reply.

Of course, if necessary he could call upon Rex and order him to leave Rome. But he didn't want to proceed to extreme measures unless it became absolutely unavoidable. He still believed that his safest plan would be to remove Laura for a time to his old castle at San Salvo.

He had often longed to visit it with her. They would be as free as two children in those ancient, romantic surroundings. Already he was wearying of the perpetual luncheon and dinner parties they were obliged to attend even though the season in Rome was a thing of the past, and all the rich resident foreigners had departed to their own countries in order to escape the heat. Romans seldom leave their city before July unless there are children to be considered.

Paul wearied of society; he wanted to be alone with his wife. They had so little private life, for at home there was always his grandmother, exigent, tyrannical, and prone to consider herself neglected unless he visited her regularly and constantly. Lately she had been in the habit of sending for him frequently on the pretext of consulting him about some important matter, but he divined that her real reason was to make him feel that marriage couldn't emancipate him from the old authority.

Like all despots when they feel their power to be on the wane, she had become punctilious about trifles.

And so far he hadn't really minded. He had Laura, and believed himself to be perfectly happy. She was happy, too, the marriage was a complete success; Laura had won golden opinions among all his friends. He was proud of the admiration evoked by her beauty. Only a few of the die-hards continued to regret her nationality and religion. And foremost among the latter was the old Marchesa Canelli—Estella's mother—who had wished in vain to obtain that prize for her own daughter.

Now in the midst of his Eden the serpent had displayed its ugly, venomous head. Paul felt in turn angry, jealous, and despairing. It was difficult for him to believe, even now when the evidence in support of such a hypothesis was so cruelly strong, that Laura was deliberately carrying on an intrigue with Rex. But there was really no valid reason why she shouldn't have frankly announced his arrival in Rome, and suggested inviting him to the palace. So what else dared he believe except that the old love had triumphed, awakened by the reappearance of Forde?

"I am going to fight this," he said to himself.

It seemed to him now that for nearly a year past, ever since their first meeting at Lady Symes's party, he had been engaged in a silent, protracted, but none the less bitter duel with Rex Forde for the possession of Laura. He had won her, she was his wife; he had even complacently congratulated himself that she was learning to love him, and was finding happiness in the life he had offered her. Now it was as if some malicious finger had wantonly jerked at his house of cards till it collapsed irremediably before his eyes. She didn't love him—had never loved him—she had sought refuge with him because of her immense desolation, and now perhaps she was

beginning to feel her position as his wife untenable because of her deathless love for this other man. That was the situation as he saw it, and it seemed to him a most grim and terrible one. . . .

VI

It was Sunday and they went to Mass together at the Church of Gesù and Maria in the Corso—one of the most perfect of the smaller baroque churches of Rome, decorated with unique marbles, bronzes and gilt stucco work. Over the High Altar hung Giacinto Brandi's picture of the Coronation of Our Lady. The strange tombs of the Bolognetti family were conspicuous on the walls above the heavily carved confessionals.

It was not very far from the palace, and Paul and Laura generally walked thither when the weather was fine, and afterwards went for a stroll on the Pincio.

It was the second day after her drive with Rex and she still lived in dread of meeting him. She would have foregone Mass that morning had it been possible, but she could have given no valid excuse for her abstention and it might have aroused Paul's suspicions into the bargain.

The June morning was deliciously fine, cool and refreshed by the recent rain. Rome was bathed in soft airs and divine sunshine. Laura wore a white dress and a wide-brimmed white hat that shaded her face. She was very dainty, Paul thought, with her little white shoes and gloves. She had the knack of perfection in regard to dress—he had never seen her wear anything that was ugly or unsuitable.

Although she looked perfectly calm, she was a prey to nervous fears. What if Rex should be lurking in the vicinity of the palace hoping to waylay her and obtain a second interview? She had not ventured out alone since

that unfortunate escapade which had made Paul so cool and distant to her, just as if he had somehow learned all about it. She wondered why he hadn't referred to it. He was brooding over it in silence, waiting perhaps for her to speak. And she couldn't do that—at least not yet, her heart was too heavy with foreboding. She almost believed to-day that Rex had the power to separate her from Paul; it was indeed almost as if the work of disintegration had already begun. He was both strong and unscrupulous, and in his attitude towards San Salvo there was something, too, of revenge. He hated him because he had married her, and also because he was rich and could give her everything she wanted.

She glanced up at her husband as she walked by his side. The stern strength of his face reassured her. Rex could never get the better of him. . . . Paul guessed something, of course, but in the long run, and especially when she had the courage to tell him the exact truth, nothing Rex could do or say could presumably affect their relation to each other. Paul probably believed that she had been seen at Ponte Milvio in company with a man, and it wouldn't require any extraordinary effort of imagination on his part to convince him of that man's identity. She almost wished he would attack her on the subject, inviting her to give him chapter and verse of her escapade. She would have been so thankful to tell him everything, to confess that she had been foolish almost to madness in going out like that to meet Rex, just because she had got it into her head that he was in difficulties and wanted to borrow money from her, and then how frightened and miserable and repentant she had felt before many minutes were over.

Paul wouldn't surely blame her too much if he knew the truth. If only she had dealt with the matter quite openly and frankly from the very beginning, it would

have saved endless trouble. She ought to have told Paul of Rex's letter and left him to deal with him as he thought best. But she had been conscious of a queer sense of loyalty towards Rex which had prevented her from treating him openly as an enemy. She had wanted to employ suave and humane methods of dealing with him because she felt positive he must have been fearfully "down on his luck" before he appealed to her to meet him. She had never for a moment suspected his real purpose nor that his object in seeking her out was to obtain ultimate possession of Hayne's money. It had been a painful, mortifying revelation to her, and, looking back, she could feel devoutly thankful to her mother for having from the first opposed their engagement.

VII

They entered the church and she knelt by Paul's side. A priest came in accompanied by a small, restless, black-eyed boy whose Latin responses were uttered with an almost superhuman rapidity. Another priest was sitting in a confessional, reading his office while awaiting any chance penitents. From time to time someone would approach and kneel on the step at the side, putting his or her face close to the grating of pierced brass. Laura let her thoughts wander a little. She wished she could have gone to confession and asked a priest's advice as to what she ought to do. She felt that she would obey almost any command, however hard and repellent it might be. She felt the need of help very keenly—the spiritual help which all Catholics could have for the asking. The way was made easy for them.

At any moment she felt that the three protagonists in the little triangle drama might meet. And although she didn't love him, and indeed almost hated him, she shrank

from the conviction that Rex would show up less well than Paul in that encounter. He would shrivel and look mean and petty, just as he had done that night at Lady Symes's when he discovered her sitting with Paul. He would excite her contempt—unbearable thought, when she reflected that once she had been his promised wife!

A bell rang and Paul knelt and bowed his head. Laura followed his example, and found herself praying almost passionately for both herself and him. Praying, too, that this temporary estrangement—it amounted to that—might soon end. Afterwards surely they would love and understand each other better than ever before.

She thought perhaps he was praying too that she might receive help and strength to resist the overwhelming temptation which he must surely believe was now assailing her. It must be terrible for him to think that . . . it might be that his own love would fail before it and eventually perish. It might indeed be that she had already forfeited it, just when she needed it so much, when it had become to her the most precious possession in the world.

Ever since the day on which she had met Rex, Paul had grown cold and remote, as if he believed that she still loved him and was suffering under the knowledge.

Mass was over; the little boy had dexterously extinguished the candles on the altar, performing his task with a deft, almost mechanical, precision. Paul rose, and Laura followed him out of the church.

In the street her old panic returned. She exclaimed:

"Oh, Paul, let's go home! I'm tired. I don't want to walk on the Pincio to-day."

The fear of encountering Rex was upon her; it was like an obsession. He was sure to be there among the crowds that flocked to the Pincio on Sunday morning.

Paul looked slightly astonished, but he made no demur

and went back to the palace with her. He guessed the cause of her extreme nervousness, and it didn't improve matters. But he was silent, as if he didn't trust himself to speak. She felt as if they were divided by immense, insuperable distances, and yet bound together in a permanent and cruel alliance.

VIII

At luncheon that day Paul said suddenly:

"We shall leave for San Salvo to-night. You'd better tell your maid to pack—we may be away some weeks. I've taken our places in the night train."

So he had made all his plans promptly and secretly and now presented her with the finished pattern. Laura felt angry and injured. He was treating her like an insubordinate child. Regardless of his grandmother's presence she exclaimed vehemently:

"You know I hate night travelling. Why couldn't you wait till to-morrow? Is there such a frightful hurry?"

She felt they were both watching her—her futile struggle and impotent rebellion. She was like a pygmy in their hands. Perhaps they had put their two heads together and concocted the plan, and were now watching to see the effect it would have upon her.

She sank back in her chair exhausted, and trembling with a sensation of anger mingled with something she could not analyze. But of course she would have to yield. . . . You had to submit to Paul's iron will just as to any other manifestation of an inflexible destiny. After the first protest she was conscious of a curious reaction. It made her care very little what happened to her, so long as she was with Paul and could feel she was doing what he wanted. He must see that if it were his highly laudable aim to detach her from Rex, she for her part was of-

fering no resistance whatever. She was simply allowing herself to be swept away by a fierce current that would bear her, she knew, safely over the rapids; its very velocity assured her of the futility of rebellion. And then there was something a little exciting about the adventure—you didn't know quite where it would eventually land you nor what was waiting for you in the calmer waters beyond. . . .

There was no need to feel any perplexity when you were Paul's wife . . . all initiative was automatically taken out of your hands. Inactive up to a certain point, he would suddenly show himself to be a man of swift decisions and inflexible purposes. She thought he ought to have commanded a great army or a perilous expedition; he would always have been loved and feared and obeyed. . . . He combined the Englishman's obstinacy with a curiously characteristic Latin subtlety. The two races were so adroitly mingled in him that it was often difficult to tell which of them really predominated. Just now it seemed to her that the Englishman was uppermost—the Englishman of the pioneer type who could fight his way through the most formidable obstacles.

She had been expecting him to make a counter-move, but perhaps less swiftly and suddenly. She said, with a final touch of defiance:

"It's sure to be frightfully hot in the train! I can't imagine why you want to leave Rome."

"Paul has long wished to visit his property at San Salvo," said the old lady sternly. There was a little pause, and then she added, "Do not forget that I promised you should both go to Estella's charity fête this afternoon."

"I'm really afraid I can't go if we're to leave to-night," said Laura, still feeling a little irritated and petulant. "There won't be time. I shall have so much to do."

"Tina will do all that you require. You have only to tell her. There's nothing to prevent you from going to the garden-party. Estella counts upon your presence."

Laura glanced entreatingly at Paul. She wanted to remain in the house till it was time to drive to the station. In this way she would avoid all chance of meeting Rex. Besides, the gardens of the Villa Canelli would be open that afternoon to all who chose to pay ten lire for an entrance ticket, and Rex might even be there. Tourists were always eager to avail themselves of an opportunity of seeing the beautiful garden which, except for an occasional charity fête, was invariably closed to the public.

Paul compromised. "I'm afraid we shall have to go since Estella expects us. But we need only stay a very short time. Laura has never seen the garden—it will interest her. Soon there will be no private gardens left in Rome—the builder is swallowing up every scrap of land."

"It isn't likely that the Canelli will be induced to sell."

"Not as long as the Marchesa is alive. But I should think Mario would be only too glad of the money. He may be compelled to part with it."

"They have had their garden for four hundred years, and it would be a crime to sell it!" The old, feverish eyes flashed indignantly. "You talk, Paolo, as if it were nothing to part with the land that has come down to you through hundreds of years of possession. That is not the way I have taught you to regard these things!"

"One has to consider modern needs. I'd rather sell my palace than that the poor should go homeless. I see no use, either, in clinging to possessions you can't afford to keep up."

"Your father was at one time a very poor man," she reminded him, "but he would never have wronged you by selling a single metre of his land."

"The world has changed since my father's time," answered Paul.

He glanced at Laura with a rather wistful expression in his dark, melancholy eyes. At least his father had had this advantage over him—he had been certain to the day of her death of his Camilla's enduring love.

"Rome is being ruined," said the old lady; "in my young days it was the most beautiful city in the world, and now it is one of the ugliest and noisiest!"

She never wearied of expatiating upon the decadence of her beloved city. All that was new in it since her own childhood she condemned without exception.

IX

Laura spent an unhappy hour in the Canelli garden that afternoon. She could never afterwards reconstruct its scenes with any ease; they appeared, melted, dissolved, as in a film drama. There were "close-ups" too—people who emerged from the throng, accosted herself and Paul, and then vanished as abruptly as they had materialized. . . .

It was, however, a very pretty and gay scene, with the bright June sunshine flowing over everything. Italian gardens with their formal and austere severity need sunlight to render them beautiful, and this one was no exception to the rule. It was on a hill overlooking Rome and yet was situated almost in the heart of the city. There were deep avenues of ilex and some splendid cypress-trees that reared their stiff, haughty spires against the warm blue of the sky. There were shady paths presided over by pale statues. The cool ripple and flow of many fountains—without which no Roman garden would be complete—fell agreeably upon the ear. Torrents of roses decorated the walls and pergolas with their brilliant

tapestry of gold and crimson and white. The air was scented with orange blossom and with the cloying fragrance of Madonna lilies.

Laura had only met Estella Canelli once or twice, yet there had sprung up between them a certain latent antagonism. Of course it was very well known in Rome that Estella was the girl whom the old Duchess of San Salvo had singled out as the most worthy candidate for the hand of her grandson. It was said too that the girl had been eager to occupy that exalted position. Not only was his great wealth an attraction, but she had fallen in love with him during his brief visit to Rome in the preceding year. Paul was uncomfortably aware that considerable progress with the *démarches* had taken place between their respective elders. And it was quite possible that if he hadn't already loved Laura, he would have married Estella and enjoyed a calm happiness. . . .

Estella was very much to the fore that afternoon. She ran hither and thither superintending everything, directing the side-shows, escorting people to the place where tea was prepared in a shady spot under the trees, greeting her friends and generally acting in a very competent authoritative manner. But when she saw Laura and Paul approaching, she abandoned all her other activities and ran up to them.

She was tall and dark, and of a beauty that was typically Roman. Her black hair and bright dark brown eyes, her pretty smile, the slim elegance of her figure combined to make her attractive, and even fascinating. When she spoke of Laura to her friends, she described her as a silly little doll who badly needed a coat of paint.

She was so essentially modern that Paul used to wonder idly why his grandmother had admired her so much. The predilection was, however, largely based upon her old friendship for Estella's mother.

She spoke to Paul now in rapid Italian. After she had shaken hands perfunctorily with Laura, she took little further notice of her. She talked a great deal to Paul with a kind of laughing vivacity, and of course what she said was incomprehensible to Laura.

Suddenly, however, she turned to her and said:

"I saw you on Friday walking near Ponte Milvio. You English are wonderful—you take long walks even in the rain. I couldn't see who was with you, but he looked like an Englishman. You would never have got an Italian to walk with you in that pouring rain unless he'd spent years in England like Paolo!"

Laura gave Paul a startled look. His face seemed to stiffen and grow more rigid.

"My wife is accustomed to going out in all weathers," he said coldly, "she can't adopt our ways all at once."

Estella smiled, believing that there was much more in it than that, and that Paul was only "bluffing." Englishwomen in her opinion were reserved and secretive, but that didn't prevent them from enjoying themselves when they had a mind to. Still, Laura looked such a quiet little thing . . . one would never have thought she had the courage. Paul, too, had the reputation of being a stern, hard man.

Fortunately there was an interruption. Some other people came up to greet Estella, and Paul and Laura were able to continue their walk round the garden.

"You mustn't mind Estella," said Paul; "she always says just what comes into her head. She means no harm, but she is an *enfant terrible,* and enjoys the rôle."

Laura was silent; she felt that she hated Estella Canelli.

It was really a children's fête and the proceeds were to be given to the war-widows and orphans of Rome. The young ones had been liberally catered for in the way of amusements, and Laura watched them with interest.

They played houp-là, and fished in the magic ponds, where for a lira you might, with luck, acquire a prize worth at least half that sum. Some of the children were singing and dancing on a little stage erected under the trees, while others moved sedately among the throng offering flowers and lottery tickets for sale.

For a short time she and Paul stood and watched the little girls as they sang and danced. They were such slender, graceful little things Laura thought, behaving with all the dignity and aplomb of grown-up people. They were at once assured and unselfconscious, and seemed quite unmoved by the applause that their efforts elicited. They brought, too, an extraordinary zest to the performance. They were charmingly pretty, with their tiny faces, deep brown eyes, and dark thick hair from which huge butterfly bows of pink or blue ribbon emerged, their slender limbs and dainty, simple frocks.

Afterwards Paul took her to a distant part of the garden to look at the view. From a broad terrace they gazed down upon Rome with its grey domes and towers, its white streets flowing away to the foot of Monte Mario . . . Rome lying there under a splendid June sun, with all its verdure refreshed and rendered incredibly brilliant by the recent rain.

As they stood there by the low wall that bordered the terrace, Laura noticed a man standing at a little distance from them. He was leaning over the wall, contemplating the view and smoking a cigarette. Something in his attitude was so terribly familiar to her that her heart seemed to turn over. She was certain that it was Rex. . . . At that moment he turned and she saw his face. He stood there, rooted to the spot as if hypnotized, and she had the dreadful fear that he would come up and speak to her. Paul was facing her with his back to Rex, thus she seemed to be looking at him across the tall,

powerful figure of her husband. She stopped short in the middle of a sentence and Paul said:

"Is anything the matter? Are you feeling the heat? Perhaps we'd better be getting a move on."

"No . . . no . . ." she said.

Her eyes were still fixed upon Rex with an expression of growing horror. It was as if she had been confronted suddenly by a malevolent spectre. Now he had begun to move. . . . He was walking away, slowly, very slowly, as if he didn't wish to appear to hurry. Rex, lithe, elusive, slipping away like a startled snake. Escaping. . . .

Paul had turned his head, perhaps to see what it was that engaged his wife's attention in this way. He was looking at Rex, too, with eyes that were imperturbably stern. But he watched the escaping figure quite as intently as she did.

Her thoughts were chaotic.

"Well, we've had quite enough of this, and you're looking as white as a sheet," said Paul. His voice broke across the tense silence during which she had wanted desperately to scream.

"Yes—I should like to go. We haven't many hours left in Rome." Her voice trembled a little. She felt as if she had found herself suddenly standing at the edge of an unsuspected crater.

Estella ran towards them.

"Oh, you mustn't go! There's a cinema performance just beginning in the orangery, and after that there'll be a conjuror."

"I'm afraid we can't stay any longer," answered Paul. "You see we're leaving to-night for the castle of San Salvo."

"For San Salvo?" she echoed, in a tone of surprise.

"You're never going to stay in that gloomy old fortress, are you?"

"Yes." His face was so impassive, it might have been carved from stone.

"And is Laura going with you?"

"Certainly."

"Well, I hope for her sake you won't stay there very long." She turned to Laura, adding: "You'll be bored to tears down there, my dear!"

Estella had been to school at a convent in England, and she spoke English fluently with a slight, but rather charming, foreign accent.

"It's for her sake I'm going. She needs—change."

"My dear, I pity you," said Estella, smiling at Laura. "We are all off to the Lido next month, and after that we're going to St. Moritz, where I shall dance all night. I mean to amuse myself at both those places. When you're tired of the castle, I advise you to come and join us."

They bade her good-bye and walked down the steps to the road, where the car was waiting for them. Laura was thinking: "She guesses why we're going. She knows it's because of Friday." The thought flicked at her pride; she felt raw all over. The afternoon had been a miserable failure.

X

Estella returned to the magic fish-ponds.

"Did you see Paolo San Salvo?" she inquired of one of her intimates. "I've never seen anything so glum in my life. I felt almost sorry for his poor little English wife. I'm sure he bullies her. I suppose he's making a fuss about her going off to Ponte Milvio on Friday. You know she was engaged to someone else before she

married him, and I expect that was the man. It was broken off because they neither of them had a *soldo!*"

Was Paul a tyrant, she wondered idly? Of course she had been bitterly mortified when she had first heard of his engagement to this English girl whom they none of them knew, since she had quite made up her mind to marry him herself. Even if he had proved rather a dull dog—he was so tremendously serious and all that—she could always have found heaps of ways of amusing herself with all that money. But the castle of San Salvo . . . such a remote, lonely spot, miles from anywhere, with no neighbors to make it at all attractive! . . .

"Laura will be miserable there," she reflected almost with satisfaction. "But I suppose he thinks she'll be out of harm's way."

CHAPTER XVI

I

THE train rushed southwards through the darkest of moonless summer nights. Laura lay in the narrow bed, sleepless, restless, and a little feverish. She was going into this new world with Paul. Quite alone, with a man who believed her to be at heart faithless to him. It was an attempt on his part to build their life anew. He had thought, perhaps, that she wasn't happy, and he felt that he must at all costs prevent her from being happy in the way she desired. If he only knew. . . .

In the berth above her she could hear his rhythmic breathing, telling of sound slumber. She wished she could sleep like that. Of late sleep had almost deserted her.

Anyone would have thought it would have been so easy to admit and explain the change that had come over her, especially to her own husband, the person chiefly concerned. But it wasn't so easy. He never now gave her any sign of his love as he had done in the first days of their marriage. He believed, perhaps, that her love was still given to Rex. He was taking her away from Rome, not so that they might be happy together and come closer to each other, but because he considered her too weak to run great risks. She was to lean on his strength, even if the contact bruised her.

San Salvo in truth believed that his wife was suffering, and he imagined that nothing could alleviate that suffering except the one thing he felt compelled to withhold from her. She had seen Rex again; to his knowledge

she had spent a whole morning with him, wandering in the rain in the purlieus of Rome. She would never have gone thus with him if she hadn't still cared for him; there must, therefore, have been a revival of the old ecstasy, emphasized by these months of separation. That was how Paul impartially envisaged the facts as he knew them. They didn't really require a great deal of explanation. . . .

For Rex, he had nothing but contempt; he deserved any suffering that might fall to his share. He had been cruelly faithless to Laura, had refused to marry her when she was free, and had only sought her out now—so Paul believed—for the sake of her newly acquired wealth. But for Laura, Paul had a deep and almost passionate pity. It was he who had led her into this impasse, and it was he who alone could save her from the worst consequences of the deadlock from which he believed she was trying to extricate herself. He told himself over and over again that he ought never to have married her. She hadn't loved him, and she had confessed to him more than once before their engagement that she still loved Rex. He saw it all so clearly that he wondered how he could ever have deluded himself into believing that she was learning to care for him. It was much more probable now that she would hate him for thwarting her; she might well resent his tyranny, his sudden assumption of authority. But she gave no evidence of that; she was only cold and silent; he had caught her looking at him once or twice rather wistfully. When he kissed her good morning and good night she would lift her face passively, yielding as a child yields. No shrinking from him—at least he had been spared that.

He was aroused when it was dawn by a faint movement from the lower berth. Leaning over the edge of his narrow bed, he could see Laura sitting with her face

close to the window, looking out upon the landscape. The pale light touched her short bright hair that was a little tumbled above her brow. Round her shoulders she wore a white silken wrapper. She looked such a very young girl that pity for her made his heart ache.

He slipped down and stood by her side, looking out of the window at the fair and beautiful view that offered itself. The flowers were wonderful. There were patches of borage that were blue as the sky; golden spaces of genista that looked as if some fabled treasure had been scattered upon the brown earth; lovely pink oleanders breaking into fragile bloom, and everywhere a riot of scarlet poppies swaying in the breeze. A wide river wound like a silver riband through the smiling emerald pastures. The vineyards already showed little bunches of green grapes hanging like pendants among the bright leaves. The olive orchards were argent-colored as the wind touched them. In the distance a range of mountains, pale and insubstantial as clouds, was faintly stencilled against the sky.

Through this landscape the train proceeded at a leisurely pace, climbing the steep slopes slowly as if with an effort. Every now and then it dipped with a hoarse shriek into a tunnel that blotted out the lovely June world. When it emerged, the smoke seemed to dim something of the lucid brilliance of the silver summer dawn.

II

"There's San Salvo," said Paul.

They had dressed at an early hour and changed trains at a junction, breakfasting during the interval at the station. The cool, crisp air, pouring in straight from the mountains, seemed to revive Laura. She drank her coffee and ate some slices of the sour bread with appetite.

Now she looked out of the window and saw, far in the distance, outlined against the pure pale blue of the morning sky, a great fortress-like castle perched high above a town that seemed to cluster and climb at its feet. Grey, forbidding, a stronghold of ancient days when the Normans had settled in the Mezzogiorno of Italy, it looked like a vast prison towards which the city of San Salvo climbed tier upon tier, terrace upon terrace, following the curve and shape of the high hill upon which it was situated. . . .

Flashes of brilliant light showed from the windows of the upper houses of the town, caught by the rays of the sun, that gilded too the golden cone-shaped summit of the cathedral tower. Beyond rose the splendid shape of Monte Vulture, its spire-like top surmounted by a cross. It hung above the city of San Salvo, whether as a menace or a protection it would have been difficult to say.

Ranges of green hills faded away into the blue of the distance; the smiling plain that stretched below the town was clothed with fields and gardens and orchards mingled with dark patches of woodland, and here and there the grouped buildings of a farm.

Laura's eyes were fixed upon her future home. The Castle of Otranto, as Hugo had jestingly called it, and she remembered how involuntarily she had responded to that romantic lure. Now reality was sweeping away every scrap of recondite romance from it, leaving it only dark and melancholy though none the less fantastic. It was unreal; she couldn't believe that it was really there, that she was going towards it, urged thither by some capricious impulse of fate impossible to withstand.

She said slowly: "It looks like a prison. Is it—haunted?"

"Well, I believe it does possess some dungeons," answered Paul lightly. "But there are no ghosts in Italy."

"Shall we stay there a very long time?" She looked at him almost in terror.

"I can't tell yet. There may be a great deal to do."

"What made your grandmother give in? She was so opposed to our coming at first."

"There were—circumstances——" he said guardedly.

He felt it would be premature to reveal his real reason. No doubt she suspected it. Their departure had been so precipitate, she must at least have divined that urgent necessity had driven him to the step.

"She agreed with me that it was the best thing to be done," he added.

"Do you always mean to be directed by her?" she asked, with a touch of bitterness.

"I shall always consider her wishes."

She was thinking: "Why did I come? I needn't have come. I ought to have shown him there was no real necessity. But he wouldn't have believed me. He would have thought it was only because I wanted to stay in Rome."

They would be like two derelicts, marooned on a desert island, doomed to each other's society that would perhaps daily grow more irksome to them both, as they drifted further and further apart with no means of escape.

The castle walls frowned upon her from afar. They made a huge massive pattern against the sky. A criminal might have felt thus, she reflected, when beholding the distant grim outline of his prison erected by men for the torture of their fellowmen.

Although he refused to disclose it, she knew that it was Paul's fear of Rex that had made him bring her thither, to be presently immured in that ancient remote castle. And beyond and much deeper than this fear of Rex was the fear in his heart for her own soul. She wanted to cry out and tell him that he had really nothing to fear—that her heart belonged wholly to him. But the impulse

passed, and something like the chill of despair seized her. He wouldn't believe her. And slowly, slowly, his own love for her was dying. . . .

She found that he was looking at her attentively.

"What are you thinking of?"

"I was only thinking it seems a very long way from anywhere. I can understand why Estella thought I should be bored there. What shall we do all day?"

"I shall have places to visit. And you—I suppose you'll work and read, and walk, and drive, as you did in Rome."

"Shall we never see anyone?"

"We haven't many neighbors, certainly. But my agent lives there with his wife, who is a very distant connection of ours, and his only child, a girl called Arduina. She is, I think, rather younger than yourself."

"Married?"

"No. She has no dowry unless I give her one. And I shall certainly not do so if she marries a very undesirable young man she believes herself to be in love with. I agree with her father in thoroughly disapproving of him."

"But if she loves him?" said Laura, with a very strange expression in her face.

"Girls can't always choose wisely. And she's a very silly little thing with absolutely nothing to recommend her but a pretty face."

Somehow Laura was beginning to feel a little sorry for the unknown Arduina.

"How hard you are, Paul," she said, with a little sigh.

"Not at all. It isn't being hard, to save people from their own folly and ignorance."

His eyes pierced her. She thought: "He's trying to tell me that he's saving me from Rex—from my folly and ignorance——"

If only she hadn't felt so chilled and desolate, she would have laughed at the humor of the situation. But his distrust of her rankled.

"Does Arduina live there—in that castle?"

"Yes. On the second floor. Our apartment will be at the top. You get a fine view from the terrace."

"I'm glad there'll be someone young. Perhaps she'll teach me to speak Italian."

"That's a splendid idea. It'll give you both an occupation. You can send for any books you want."

"But, Paul—we shan't stay there for months and months, shall we?"

"I don't know about months and months, but I expect my work will take some time to accomplish."

"Is it—so difficult?" Her voice trembled a little.

"I can hardly judge of that yet."

III

The castle was still a long way off, and the train seemed to make but little progress towards it, for the railway followed a winding course round the flanks of the hills. Rocky slopes frequently intervened to hide the view. They were almost perpendicular and were sparsely clad with brushwood, myrtle, and heath, with a few olives and pine-trees. But everywhere the genista covered whole tracts with its bright wonder of gold so that the place looked almost like a blossoming garden.

Everywhere, too, the poppies flamed amid the sparse verdure.

At last the train rushed into the station at San Salvo. The platform was crowded with people, among whom Laura perceived a bishop accompanied by other ecclesiastics, the mayor wearing his chain of office, the prefect and other officials, representing the clergy and the bu-

reaucracy of the little southern city. A little girl clad in white held a bouquet which she shyly presented to Laura, dropping a deep curtsey and uttering a few words of welcome in a high, clear voice. From afar they could hear the cathedral bells ringing a joyous peal.

It was only then she realized that these people, representative of all that was important in the clerical and lay life of San Salvo, had assembled to meet their prince and his wife. For them the bells were pealing and the whole town was *en fête,* with flags flying and crowds of spectators lining the streets.

A short address was read, San Salvo replying briefly, and then they all proceeded to leave the station. The bishop and clergy entered the first carriage and drove off, San Salvo followed in the next with his wife and the mayor, while the prefect and other members of the corporation occupied the remaining equipages.

The streets of San Salvo were steep and narrow, and possessed no pavements, but the traffic was at all times negligible, so that the lack of them was scarcely felt. Children played on the cobbled ways amid chickens and dogs, goats and pigs. But to-day even these impedimenta had been swept out of sight so as to leave the roads clear for the visitors. Outside the schools a number of children, boys and girls, wearing black Fascist caps, waved the tricolor and saluted in Fascist fashion.

All eyes were fixed upon Laura. Her radiant northern beauty made an immediate appeal to them. She was *carina, graziosa, fina, signorile;* she was like an angel with her bright, fair hair, her shining violet-grey eyes! Her small pale face was faintly flushed now with excitement and a strange sense of pride that was new to her. Paul felt convinced that they must all see how beautiful and adorable she was. A thing of foam and air, a spirit sojourning as it were reluctantly on earth and finding the

path rather a thorny one, suffering, too, from the grim contact with hard realities. He felt a strange responsibility towards her. It hurt him to think she was even now fretting for her lost fredom, that she had come here against her will although she had made no protest.

To look at, they seemed a more than commonly happy couple, very richly endowed with this world's goods, possessing, too, an extraordinary measure of physical beauty, as if nothing had been omitted in their equipment for life's race. Yes, these people would see them smiling and flourishing and happy; they would perhaps envy them. They would never guess—how should they?—that their marriage had so nearly foundered like some ill-fated vessel on the rocks of destiny.

San Salvo bowed in response to the repeated salutations, raising his hat, and gazing at the eager crowds that were surging to obtain a glimpse of him and his wife. Laura leaned forward and looked at the children with a smile that touched their hearts. Something of her old spontaneous gaiety returned to her; she felt eager and enthusiastic, and profoundly interested—a fact which her charming, sensitive face betrayed. His expression, on the contrary, was *chiuso,* so they decided; it gave little inkling as to what was passing in his mind. Some of them thought he looked almost too old and stern to be the husband of that fair child-like figure at his side.

Now they had reached the last street; there were breaks in the line of houses; an open road bordered by plane-trees separated them from the castle walls. The last part of the way between the gates and the courtyard was flagged, and was so steep as to be almost perpendicular.

The carriage stopped, and Laura realized that they had reached their journey's end. The frowning walls of the Castle of Otranto rose forbiddingly above her. On one side a solitary cypress-tree stood erect like a plume of black smoke.

IV

In the courtyard a group of people awaited them. A huge broad-shouldered giant of a man with grizzled hair of that close curly character, which is supposed to denote Saracen ancestry; a tired-looking woman of forty-five, and a young girl who bore little resemblance to either of her parents.

Twenty years ago her mother, who was of gentle birth, and was even remotely connected by marriage with the San Salvo family, had made what was considered a misalliance in marrying Domenico Zevi, a man of the artisan class. He was, however, clever and shrewd, and had worked himself up into a good position even before Paul had appointed him agent of his southern property. He had a harsh face, deeply lined, and heavy black brows above deep-set dark eyes.

Laura shook hands with Domenico and Maria Zevi, and then turned to the girl, who looked very charming and pretty in her simple dress of pink cotton. Youth called to youth, and obeying some vague impulse she stooped and kissed her.

Arduina was a slim strip of a girl with a childish figure, narrow shoulders and hips, and a long, slender, delicately browned throat. She had small, accurately drawn features, and very deep brown eyes that were as soft as velvet. Laura felt much the older of the two; she could hardly believe that Arduina was almost her own age, and was already contemplating marriage. She felt a strong desire to help her. For wasn't she exactly in the same position as she herself had been not a year ago? Loving one man, yet being urged into marriage with another? It was a dangerous experiment to make; it didn't always prove successful. One might still go on loving that other man; there might even come a day when

an overwhelming temptation would supervene. . . . She had gone so close to that peril herself that she didn't want Arduina to run a like risk. She had a weak yielding look about her little rosebud of a mouth, and then all men were not as Paul.

During their brief transit to the Castle, Laura had felt a strange passion of pride in her husband. He was her own possession—this man whom they had all come out to welcome. She felt that many people in that crowd must have envied her because she was the woman upon whom his choice had fallen. They would never guess anything of that loneliness, that sense of desolation, that were hers now. They wouldn't imagine, either, that in these few short months his heart had grown cold towards her. Love demanded love, and she had had no love to give him until his own had been chilled by her lack of response. It was a simple, dreadful little tragedy. Perhaps it often happened, but that didn't seem to make it any the more bearable. Worse still, Paul believed that her love was given to another man. All these things had combined to chill and kill his own devoted love.

But they would never guess that—these people who had come out to greet them. They would see in her only a woman to be supremely envied, possessing a young wealthy husband, a great position, dainty clothes, beautiful jewels, money to squander. It was true she had all this, and she realized how outwardly her lot must seem a most fair and enviable one.

It was she herself who had spoilt and marred it. She had clung in thought to that other idol whose revealed worthlessness had taught her too late the measure of her love for Paul.

"Arduina," she said softly.

The girl smiled, a little embarrassed; she had never spoken to a foreigner before in her life. The warm,

affectionate greeting had astonished her, the more so because she had always heard that the English were cold and proud and hid their feelings even if they liked you. A faint sense of hero worship for this lovely woman so little older than herself stirred within her. She felt as if Laura had already brought warmth and light and something of magic to the old castle. Some day perhaps she would be able to talk to her alone, to confide in her and tell her how unhappy she was because her father had forbidden her to see or to speak to Luigi Bertoli. And now they were talking of her marriage to Ettore Brunelli this summer, if the Duke approved and consented to give her the promised dowry.

Arduina was aware that her father intended to enlist San Salvo's assistance in the matter. But Laura, being so young and beautiful, would no doubt be able to influence her husband, and she would surely persuade him to refuse his help when she realized how greatly she—Arduina—disliked and feared Brunelli. He was a great deal older than herself and was a widower with one little boy.

Sometimes when he came to the castle to visit them, Arduina had gone away and hidden herself in the old ruined part where the bats and owls made their abode, so that she might escape from seeing him. And that had angered her father. Once he had told her roughly that if she behaved like a child she would be beaten like a child. . . .

All through her short life she had been spoilt and indulged until now, when she was, alas, almost continually in disgrace. There had been a terrible scene a few weeks ago because she had slipped out one evening and gone for a long country walk with Luigi. Her parents had discovered it somehow—it was impossible to hide anything in that gossiping, provincial town. After that, she

had never been allowed to go out alone. Someone had told her since that Luigi was consoling himself with another girl. Arduina was tormented with jealousy, with a sense of frustration that embittered her whole life. Now Laura's presence seemed to bring with it a comforting gleam of hope. The Duke must certainly love her very much, must wish to give her all that she demanded. She was so young and lovely he couldn't surely refuse her anything.

After a brief conversation they climbed an immense flight of wide stone stairs. There was no lift, and a kind of soft dusk filled the place, blurring all the outlines. On the landings were one or two closed doors. Laura was panting a little by the time she reached the top. The door was open, and a group of servants stood smiling on the threshold. Some of them came forward and kissed her hand.

Arduina and her parents took leave of them, and Paul and Laura entered their new abode alone.

It was comfortably though simply furnished, but the rooms struck her as a little chilly even on this brilliant June morning when the whole countryside lay bathed in sunshine. She felt that the place could not have been inhabited for a long time. It had the chill, the musty flavor, of houses that haven't been lived in. Still, the view from the deep-set windows was incredibly lovely, and Laura looked out delightedly upon that lovely summer landscape, the wide smiling valley, green with corn and vine, and painted here and there with the bright gold of the gorse ashine in the sunlight. Monte Vulture rose splendidly before them, its pointed summit crowned by a cross. It was all purple and blue with deep indigo-colored hollows in its flanks, while its lower slopes were powdered with the gold-dust of the ubiquitous genista.

Below them, almost perpendicularly so that she felt

she could have practically dropped a stone upon that medley of roofs, was the town of San Salvo, grouped around the fine cathedral, whose golden tower rose above them like a great minaret, its cone-shaped top colored in green and gold. The brilliant emerald verdure of little gardens broke the lines of white walls and red roofs. Far away in the distance, beyond the beautiful valley of the Ofanto, a line of blue mountains soared against the sky.

As she stood there Paul slipped his arm into hers.

"Do you think you'll like it?"

"Yes, I'm sure I shall."

She felt suddenly confident of her own power to win Paul again. They would be alone here, freed from that fiery, vigilant presence with its ill-concealed hostility to herself. Alone with Paul, for the first time since their honeymoon. The thought gave her a queer little thrill of excitement.

"Of course it's dreadfully far from anywhere, isn't it?" she went on; "we seem to have come to the end of the world. But I suppose we can always go back to Rome when we get bored."

The nameless depression she had experienced in the train, emphasized perhaps by her first sight of the Castle of San Salvo, had quite vanished, and she felt only excited and a little nervous. So much depended upon their sojourn here—perhaps the whole happiness of their future life together. She felt she could be more at her ease with Paul, now that his grandmother wasn't there to look on and find fault with her. At least here she would have a fair chance. . . .

"I can't go back for some time," he said.

"Well, if you get bored with me, you must send me back to your grandmother. I could keep her company," she said lightly.

"No, I don't think I could let you do that," he answered.

"Why? Wouldn't you trust me there alone?"

She felt a little reckless, almost as if she wished to fling her cards on the table and expected him to do the same, and disclose all that went to the making of his secret and inflexible purpose.

"I suppose that's it," he answered.

She laughed, a trifle mirthlessly. Oh, how blind he was not to perceive the truth! . . .

"You really have the most mediæval ideas about women!"

He smiled. "Human nature doesn't change much. Things are really much the same as they always were."

"Are they?"

She drummed with her fingers on the wide stone sill.

"I'm sure those people envied me this morning. They were thinking how wonderful it must be to be the Duchess of San Salvo—and your wife."

She wanted him to tell her that it was far, far more wonderful for him to know it. But his face was impassive. He was thinking of that figure of whom he had caught a glimpse only yesterday, slinking out of sight, furtively, as if fearing to be seen. And a dull anger rose in his heart to think that such a man should ever have dared to love, to contemplate marrying, Laura.

It was horrible to remember too that she should have squandered the fresh, beautiful love of her youth upon such a wastrel.

"I liked that girl Arduina," she went on, more to break the tension of the silence than for any other reason. "But she doesn't look happy."

"That's entirely her own fault. She's been behaving very badly—her father wrote to me about it long ago. He begged me to use my influence when I came. He's

had a lot of trouble with her. If he had any sense he'd give her a good beating."

"A beating? Oh, Paul—what a cruel idea! Poor little Arduina—no wonder she looks so miserable."

"It might be cruel at the time, but it would be kind in the long run."

"Oh, you're surely not responsible for Arduina's soul," she exclaimed, with a little taunt in her voice that flicked him like a whip.

"I shouldn't like anything to happen to her. It would break her mother's heart."

"And do you think being beaten would prevent anything happening to her? Wouldn't it be much more likely to encourage her to run away and go to the man who cares for her?"

"Oh, she'd never have the courage to do that. I think it would frighten her—teach her to obey—she's such a child."

"Paul, dear, you ought to have lived in the year One, when women were shut up in towers and beaten if they disobeyed their parents, or deceived their husbands."

She uttered the last words very deliberately and distinctly. They sounded almost like a challenge, and for the moment he stared at her in astonishment not unmixed with displeasure. Did she really mean to make light of that adventure which had so filled him with anxiety and dismay and fear for her future?

His brow lowered. But Laura had no idea she was going too far; she wanted to tease him into a better humor. She added gaily:

"Perhaps you were afraid of something happening to me, and that's why you brought me here to be shut up in this tower!"

His eyes blazed; they looked like smouldering fires. She glimpsed then his fierce but controlled temper. Her

words provoked him to speech. She had asked for it, and now she should have it.

"I'm not going to run any risks with you, Laura, if you wish to know. Yesterday in the Canelli garden I saw that man Forde. I already knew he was in Rome——"

He could only articulate with difficulty, and she saw that his great frame was trembling. She shrank away from him in fear. So he had known, and her provocative words had forced him to divulge the truth. She felt a little sick. She had an idea that Paul's anger when it was roused would not easily be quenched.

"You lied to my grandmother about being seen with him at Ponte Milvio."

"I—didn't lie."

"Implicitly, if not explicitly," he reminded her.

All the gaiety and courage had gone from her face and mien. She was face to face with a Paul she didn't know and who she hadn't dreamed existed. She looked like a small, pale, frightened child, suddenly confronted by a menacing spectre. The spectre of Paul's anger. It didn't improve matters to realize that she had provoked the scene by her own recklessness. Little by little she had taunted him into making an avowal of his motive for bringing her to the Castle of San Salvo.

She thought that in this mood he was capable of cruelty —even to her. She shivered and whitened.

"You may as well know the truth now," he went on in that savage tone which made his voice sound rough and hoarse. "I did bring you down here to get you out of that swine's way. He isn't fit to touch your hand. It's shameful that you could ever have loved him, but it's doubly shameful that you, my wife, should have met him in Rome on the sly. He deserves to be shot!"

She knew then that her folly had stirred him to the depths of his being, touching she knew not what of pride

and honor. But had it killed his love too? Had it? She glanced at him, but his expression never softened and his hard eyes searched her face relentlessly.

"I am your husband. I forbid you ever to see or speak to him again. I know you are very young, but you aren't a child——"

He caught her hand in his and gripped it until it hurt.

"You are my wife—remember that! I see now that I was wrong to persuade you to marry me in the circumstances. I can't put all the blame on you. I should have waited. But a marriage such as ours can't be dissolved, and I am responsible for you."

"Paul—you're hurting me——"

He dropped her hand. It fell to her side, crimson, a little swollen. She felt as if the very bones had been crushed in a cruel vice.

"I brought you here so that you should never see him again. As long as he remains in Rome, you shall never return there. You can't possibly deceive me with your pretence of wishing to go and keep my grandmother company!"

She was weeping now from pain and terror. Presently she dragged herself listlessly away and went to her own room. It was an immense, lofty apartment with huge windows set in deep stone embrasures. She flung herself down on a couch and closed her eyes, praying for the oblivion of sleep.

She had come face to face with a new and terrible thing—the angry hostility of Paul.

V

Always Laura felt that subconsciously she had been aware of the truth which Paul had just so passionately

divulged. He had brought her to San Salvo because he intended to guard her from Rex, to prevent any further meetings between them. She was never again to see this man who from first to last had played such an evil part in her life. Paul shared with Lady Rydal a deep, instinctive mistrust of him.

She wished she could have felt quite sure that Paul's arbitrary action had been inspired by love, not by a mere concern for her soul and his own honor! But in that moment of explanation he seemed to have no love left for her. At a word his anger had leapt forth like an unsheathed sword, fiery, deadly, devastating. It had made the world a darkness about her.

But she loved him the more passionately for his strength and power that held her so closely she could never escape. Forde could never have exercised this complete dominion over her; he was too much a child of his generation, easy-going, careless, selfish, inconstant. If her love for him had incredibly prevailed and she had consented to face with him the smirched life of a divorcee, she knew well all that she would have had to endure at his hands. The anguish of his faithlessness, of seeing his love again, as once she had seen it fail before the first breath of adversity.

Paul seemed to overshadow Rex, to blot out that figure that had become so mean and worthless in her regard.

She was asleep when her husband came into the room. The violent reaction of the morning, combined with the fatigue of her journey had exhausted her. He stood for a few minutes looking at her with a strange compassion in his eyes. She was so very young, so reckless, so unwise. Her fair face was still wet and disfigured from those recent tears. He reproached himself for having been too harsh and violent; perhaps he had forfeited something of her love and confidence. Love? She had

none to give him. All her love was prodigally spent upon this other man. His face hardened at the thought.

One hand lay outstretched upon her dress, palm upwards. It was red and inflamed as if from the clutch of cruel fingers. He felt ashamed, and stooping he kissed it.

She opened her eyes. "Paul—is that you?"

Had that little scene been part of a dreadful tragic dream in which she had found herself without warning constrained to play a principal part?

"Yes, I'm so sorry, Laura. Forgive me. I didn't mean to hurt you. Do bathe your hand in warm water."

"Oh, I didn't mind really," she murmured, vaguely comforted to think of his restored serenity.

She wanted to put out her arms and draw his face down to hers, but she didn't dare. The impulse passed and with it the opportunity. He went softly out of the room.

VI

That night she stood at her open window and looked down upon the city of San Salvo. There was no moon, but the black sky was scattered with stars shining so close to the summit of the hills that one could hardly tell where the lamps of San Salvo ended and the lights of heaven began. It was just as if some prodigal hand had flung millions of glittering golden sequins over the black cup of the earth and the black dome of the sky.

It was very still. She could hear the sound of falling water, the cool, liquid fluting of the frogs in some pond far down in the plain; the frightened screech of a passing night-bird. The air was warm; there was no wind. Monte Vulture stabbed the starry sky like a dark, shadowy sword. Far below in the road she heard a man's voice singing, singing. . . .

CHAPTER XVII

I

IN THE days that followed, Laura sometimes found herself thinking: "Paul's a cave-man. One wouldn't suspect it with those polished, courteous manners, but that's what he is."

It amused her to examine him thus. She wondered what Charmian would say if she could know the whole history of their coming to San Salvo.

Laura contrasted her own life, as it was now, with that of her sister. Charmian always did exactly as she pleased and Hugo was never annoyed. He was incapable of jealousy, and wanted her to extract as much amusement from life as she could. She had hosts of devoted young men with whom she constantly danced or went to the play, and Hugo never dreamed of remonstrating with her. He knew that she had a cold heart and steady head. She would never have stooped to even the most innocent intrigue. What she did, she did openly. Nor would she ever have allowed herself to fall in love with a man like Rex—a man whom his own cousin Darell Hayne had called a "rotter." The word had angered Laura at the time, but she could see now that it hadn't missed the mark. He was a rotter, unworthy to be in the same room with Paul. And she had been a little fool to risk losing Paul's love by meeting Rex surreptitiously in Rome.

The novelty of her surroundings combined with the glorious summer weather that prevailed prevented her from brooding too much over the misunderstanding that

had arisen between herself and her husband. Besides she could never bring herself to believe that it would last; she would surely soon find an opportunity of setting matters right. It only required a little courage and tact. She must just wait until his present mood of distrust and jealousy had passed off.

Of course it was horrible to think he should believe she still cared for Rex, but really she had given him ample reason for supposing this was the case, and recent events were still too fresh in his mind for her to be able as yet to convince him to the contrary.

Paul was secretly delighted to find that she seemed to have settled down so happily at the castle. She expressed no wish to return to Rome; she never admitted that she was bored in that lonely country place with its absolute lack of all amusement except what was afforded by motor excursions to neighboring towns.

Every morning at a fixed hour Arduina came up to give her a lesson in Italian. She spoke a little French, so that they were able to talk to each other in that language, and thus the girl was able to relate to Laura something of her own unhappiness and perplexity. At first she was a little afraid to do so, fearing that Laura would be certain to share her husband's views on the subject. She mustn't expect anything more than sympathy from that quarter; it was unlikely that any practical assistance would be forthcoming.

Laura was always kind and affectionate to her, and sometimes gave her a little present—a pair of silk stockings, a scarf, or some sweets. Once, however, when she had been there a few weeks she gave her a pale grey *crêpe de Chine* dress and a hat that matched it in color and was adorned with a rose-pink ribbon.

Arduina was delighted. She had all the Italian girl's love of pretty, dainty clothes. She made up her mind to

wear both dress and hat at High Mass on Sunday; she hoped Luigi would be there to see her in this fine array. She thanked Laura effusively, and kissed her hand. But Laura raised the girl's face to her own and kissed her on both cheeks. It was so easy, she found, to make Arduina happy: a word of affection, a trifling gift, a few smiles and kisses and the thing was done. She liked the girl—she was so young and pretty and soft. Almost too young really to be thinking of marriage. But here in the south Paul had told her the girls married very young.

One day when Laura was walking out with Arduina they met a short, rather stout man, with grizzled hair and moustache, accompanied by a little boy. He took off his hat and bowed low. When they had passed, Arduina whispered:

"That was Ettore Brunelli." Her face was crimson.

Laura had rather a shock. Of course he looked a great deal too old for Arduina, and she felt desperately sorry for the girl. She wondered why Paul should approve of such a marriage for her. There was the child too—he looked about nine years old, a big, upstanding boy with a resolute little face.

"They say I am to marry him this summer," said Arduina.

"But if you don't like him?"

"That makes no difference. They say I shall like him when he is my husband."

Laura resolved to speak to Paul privately on the subject. There really could be no such vast hurry to get Arduina married, even if they did wish to prevent her from marrying her adored Luigi.

"My father wants me to marry him because he is rich and has a lot of property here. Vineyards and a farm and a house in San Salvo besides. They tell me I'm a lucky girl because he wants to marry me."

"Perhaps they feel you wouldn't be happy if you were poor," Laura suggested.

"I shouldn't mind. I can cook and sew, and do many things." She glanced enviously at Laura. "Oh, how fortunate you are to have such a husband! He is young, and rich, and handsome—he can give you everything. I envy you."

Laura colored faintly.

"Yes, I'm very fortunate," she said, with a hint of bitterness in her tone that was quite lost upon Arduina.

"It must be perfect to marry someone you love very much," continued the girl, "the greatest happiness. . . . It can never be mine; but if I do marry Ettore, I shall try to be a good wife, and of course I shall love my children when they come. But I can never be *really* happy like you."

Laura was silent; she couldn't help being impressed by Arduina's earnest words. "But if she knew everything she wouldn't envy me," she thought. "I ought to be just as happy as she thinks I am, but I've made a mess of everything."

"But I hope you will be very happy," she said, after a moment's hesitation, during which she wondered whether it was her duty to uphold Paul's authority or not. "Often one changes a little. Things turn out better than one expects. You may learn to love Ettore when you're his wife. Marriage does make a difference, you know."

She proffered the statement a little timidly.

Arduina shook her head.

"He's so stern—I shall always be afraid of him. Oh, I envy you—you have everything in the world! You're rich, and as beautiful as an angel—so they say here—and the Duke adores you. We've all noticed it." She looked at Laura with eyes full of a shy worship. "And you are very beautiful, *cara duchessa.*"

"Don't call me that—call me Laura. You know, you are almost a cousin."

"Laura," repeated Arduina, as if there were music in the sound.

When their walk was over and they parted, Laura kissed her.

Somehow the girl's words had comforted her—she was evidently so convinced of Paul's love for her. The change in him—if change there were—couldn't, after all, be so very apparent since no one seemed to have noticed there was anything amiss.

II

Paul, no less than Laura, experienced an immense sense of relief at their freedom from all restraint, and from the tireless vigilance of his grandmother, who had always seemed so determined to discover some fresh flaw in the woman he had married.

She had never pretended to like Laura, who was of far too modern and definitely English a type to suit her. But she recognized with the undeceivable eyes of love and jealousy her subtle influence over Paul, and was resolved to combat it. She had no intention of yielding the reins of government to this stranger, so ignorant of all their ways and shibboleths, whose pretty face and childish charm had so caught his fancy. Indeed, she clung to the insignia of office almost violently, after the manner of many women of her generation, inspired and fortified no doubt by the illustrious example of Queen Victoria, who continued obstinately to wield the sceptre till death wrested it from her aged hands.

Always Paul had the uncomfortable feeling that she was waiting for Laura to expose herself and disgrace him. And then hadn't his wife deliberately played into

her hands by that foolish adventure with Rex—an action which he could only interpret in the one way?

Often he recalled his grandmother's words of warning, spoken in that decisive trenchant voice: "Some English lover, probably. You'll have to be careful, my dear; a woman always at heart prefers the men of her own nation." There was a little poisoned sting in the speech that could still stab and shame him. For Laura had shown so clearly, hadn't she, that she still cared for Rex? . . .

Still, it was a comfort to find that she wasn't discontented with her present rather dull and restricted life. She was free to go out and come in as she chose, and she was very often out with Arduina when Paul was too busy to accompany her. They went for long walks together, and sometimes drove to neighboring towns and places of interest for purposes of sightseeing.

The summer drought, that great enemy of the Mezzogiorno, had set in, and now for many months there would probably be no rain except for a very rare thunderstorm which when accompanied by hail often did considerable damage to the crops. Drought combined with the poverty and aridity of that sun-baked soil, contributed fatally to the failure of agriculture in that beautiful and spacious southern province. Vines and olives alone seemed to flourish, and the city of San Salvo had long been famous for its trade in wine and oil.

III

Every morning there was Mass at eight o'clock in the little chapel down in the courtyard of the castle. It was generally attended by most of the inhabitants of the house, and Laura inquired if Paul wished her to be present.

"On Sundays, certainly—you must please yourself about the other days," was his answer. "Later on, a

great friend of mine, Don Fedele, will come here to act as chaplain—he always does when Don Lorenzo is away. I think you'll like him."

Laura had been conscious of late of a growing desire to become a Catholic. She wanted the definite, concrete help in all her difficulties which she knew the Church could give her. But she hesitated to speak of this to Paul—it seemed unfair to force a reconciliation by such means as those. He would be justified in suspecting the genuineness of her conversion.

But she rarely missed Mass, even on week-days, and was a little disappointed because Paul made no comment; she had hoped that he might notice her assiduity and perhaps say a word in praise of it.

Sometimes she would glance across the chapel and think: "We seem farther apart than ever. But he doesn't seem to mind, so I suppose that's what he wants."

Would he ever forgive her—he who had so little to forgive? . . . Would she ever have the courage to tell him that all her thoughts of Rex were tinged with a deep, deep anger because he had come between herself and her husband?

It was terrible to think that now she was giving Paul all the love of her heart he didn't seem to want it any more. That first lack of ardor had chilled him; he believed that she had uttered an unalterable truth when she confessed that she didn't love him; he had never noticed the gradual change in her. He had become indifferent. . . . More than ever in those days was he difficult to approach. The episode of Rex still rankled; it had driven him into his shell, had convinced him perhaps that their marriage was one of those unhappy, irremediable mistakes that can turn two lives to irreparable bitterness. That was why he held aloof. They were eternally separated and apart, knowing nothing of each other's secret thoughts.

IV

One morning Laura noticed that Arduina was crying during Mass, and she did not appear at the usual hour to give her a lesson in Italian. Presently she sent up a message to say that she had a headache, and asked Laura to excuse her.

She mentioned this to Paul at luncheon, and he said:

"I think I know what's the matter with her. She's heard about her precious Luigi having gone to Vegliano. I've found a post for him there—he's much better out of the place. He was doing no good here, and only making that silly girl miserable."

"Vegliano! Is that far from here?"

"Oh, it's a good way off, on the Adriatic coast. He won't have much time for coming over to San Salvo, and, besides, I've given him a strong hint to stay away. Now they've got rid of him, Domenico and Maria can make plans for Arduina's marriage."

"Isn't that running a great risk?"

"Risk?"

"I mean, forcing her to marry one man when she's in love with another?"

"My dear Laura, she can't possibly marry Luigi—he isn't in a position to support a wife even if he wants to marry her, which I very much doubt. Girls have these foolish fancies, but Brunelli will knock all that nonsense out of her head. He wants someone to look after his house and take care of his child, and Arduina's perfectly capable of doing it. As people go, down here, he's a rich man."

Laura was silent. She felt sorry for Arduina, whose little romance had thus been arbitrarily quenched. Paul was surely acting in a hard, autocratic way in thus conniving at the banishment of Luigi.

She saw nothing of Arduina for several days, and when she inquired for her she was told briefly that she was ill. She missed her, and it was a relief to her when one morning the girl appeared at the usual hour to give her a lesson.

She was pale and calm, but when Laura put an arm round her and kissed her she burst into a passion of weeping.

"He's gone—they've sent him to Vegliano, where I shall never see him! The Duke wished for it too. Oh, couldn't you have prevented it? Couldn't you have pleaded for us?"

There was a note of reproach in her voice although she still clung to Laura.

"I didn't know anything about it till it was all settled and Luigi had gone," said Laura. "Paul didn't consult me."

"I can't marry Ettore! I'd rather die. My father says I am to be married in August——"

"I'm so very sorry for you, Arduina, dear. I would have tried to help you if I'd known about it in time. Was Luigi very unhappy at having to go?"

"I don't know—I wasn't allowed to see him. And if he wrote, I never had the letter—I'm watched and watched—and my father's very angry——"

Laura wondered whether Luigi did really care about the girl or had any serious intention of marrying her; he seemed to have accepted his decree of banishment so unprotestingly.

"Next week, or perhaps the week after, they will announce my betrothal. Then there will be a great dinner for all our relations——"

"But, dear Arduina, there's surely no great hurry for you to be married? Why not wait a little? You're so very young——"

Arduina looked this morning more like an unhappy, tormented child than a bride to be.

"Ettore refuses to wait. He says he's waited long enough. He and my father are both determined."

Laura longed to save the girl from a loveless marriage, but she knew it would be useless to appeal to Paul. Arduina was so young, and although she might learn to love Ettore, she was running a very grave risk. Love didn't always come . . . and when it did the man had perhaps grown cold and indifferent with waiting. That was what sometimes happened. There was a breaking-point, as Charmian had once told her, and as she now knew, to her own grief. . . .

This life at San Salvo was dull and eventless, she reflected, and when Arduina became engaged and was immersed in the innumerable and complicated preparations for her marriage she would be deprived of her only companion. Paul was out a great deal, visiting his extensive properties, full of schemes for afforestation in the hope of inducing an adequate rainfall, and for the building of more aqueducts for the irrigation of that parched, arid soil. He had golden visions of a prosperous, fertile Mezzogiorno, of making the desert blossom as the rose.

His brief, fierce anger was over, and he had withdrawn into a chilling reserve that was almost harder to bear. Their slight disagreement on the subject of Arduina's future had deepened it, and Laura refrained from approaching him again on the matter. She was sorry for the girl, but she was still more sorry for herself.

She had few outside interests to occupy her mind and distract her from the perpetual contemplation of her own unhappy situation. Letters were scarce; even Charmian wrote but seldom, and her characteristic screeds were of the briefest. Her latest news was that they in-

tended to go for a cruise in the Mediterranean and might possibly visit Venice. Was there any likelihood of Laura's being able to meet them there? Laura knew there was none, and by the time her answer reached London, the Karslakes had already left.

V

One morning Laura went with Arduina to a little pilgrimage church in the country, two or three miles from the castle.

It was called the Madonna dell'Incoronata, and was in quite an isolated spot up a steep lane that climbed through fields from the old Roman high road.

Their way lay through olive orchards and vineyards, where the bunches of little green grapes were rapidly swelling beneath the rays of the hot June sun. The corn was already reaped, and the fields and hedgerows were bright with flowers—poppies, marigolds, blue and purple thistles, and the slim, crimson spikes of the gladiolus.

When they arrived, they found the little bare, whitewashed church densely packed with peasants. Men, women, and children filled the seats and narrow aisles and sometimes a stray dog could be seen. The statue of the Madonna, carved of some dark brown wood, was hung in a glass case above the High Altar, surrounded by wreaths of bright pink artificial roses. She wore a golden crown and a dress of white satin fashioned in some bygone mode. Her outstretched hands were filled with flowers, and it seemed to Laura that she was offering gifts to these poor people who had left their toil in field and workshop to-day to do her honor. Little angels hovered above her, and on the walls beyond could be seen innumerable silver votive hearts, medals, rosaries, and small, ill-drawn pictures—tributes humble in themselves

but eloquent of gratitude for past mercies obtained through her intercession.

And those present, with their stolid, sun-browned faces, rough and weather-worn, had come hither to offer their prayers for a thousand secret intentions: their sorrow and contrition for sin, their desire for happiness and success, their entreaties for release, perhaps, from some long-endured burden of pain or grief; their hopes, fears, and ambitions . . . confident that she, the Mother offered and accepted for all time at the foot of the Cross, would listen to their petitions and intercede for them with Her Beloved Son. The incense-laden atmosphere was heavy with worship and prayer. . . .

Laura found herself kneeling beside Arduina in that dense throng, praying for the first time to the Mother of God.

"Make him understand that I love him—teach him——" she prayed.

A bell rang and a priest went up to the altar to say Mass. They could hear his voice and the quick, abrupt responses of the little acolyte who accompanied him. Otherwise the silence was almost complete save for a few summer sounds that stole in through the open door—the shrilling of a cicala, the humming of a great blue bee, afar the yelp of a dog. Within one sensed only the pilgrimage atmosphere, fervent, passionate, fiercely devout.

When Mass was over, Laura rose from her knees and emerged rather thankfully into the pure warm June air. She and Arduina stopped to examine the wares that were being offered for sale upon a row of stalls outside the church. A fair, whether large or small, is the inevitable accompaniment of a pilgrimage in Italy. Fruit and vegetables, dark and somewhat repellent-looking sweetmeats and cakes, a little haberdashery, some imitation tortoiseshell combs, and charming baskets of colored straw

that were of local fashioning were eagerly proffered by the peasant vendors.

Laura bought two baskets, giving one to Arduina. Then they set forth on their hot walk homeward, down the lane and along the white dusty high road that was still thronged with pilgrims. Most of them tramped stolidly along, but a few aged men and women were mounted on weary-looking donkeys and mules. The stream of pilgrims would flow continuously and without pause all through the day. From many miles around, the people would come to visit the famous shrine and pray before the Madonna of the Incoronata.

Laura could see the city of San Salvo rising in front of her, raked by the bright, hot sunshine, climbing tier upon tier to the very summit of the hill whereon was proudly perched the great, formidable Norman castle, grim, forbidding, and looking more than ever like a prison in the dancing, blinding June sunlight. It seemed, from its eyrie, to hang menacingly above the town, eloquent of the days when it was the scene of important councils, and later of the time when it had watched the massacre of thousands of victims during the capture and conquest of the city. Laura thought of the day when she had first seen it from the train, across the broad silver flow of the Ofanto and the smiling southern valley that stretched to the foot of Monte Vulture.

Although they had been there nearly a month, Paul never spoke of leaving it, despite the summer heat that daily grew more intense. He was immersed in work and projects of all kinds, and seemed to think scarcely at all of his wife, who was wasting her youth in that remote spot.

Yet she felt that she could have lived there all her life in perfect contentment and happiness if only Paul had loved her as he had loved her in the first days of their marriage.

VI

One evening Paul informed her that he intended to go away for two or three days to visit some property that lay farther south in a somewhat remote and inaccessible region situated in what is known as the spur of Italy. Domenico was to accompany him, and, although he expressed some regret at leaving her, he added that it would be useless for Laura to go with him, as the roads were very bad and he would have to ride a great part of the way. It was probable also that he would have to stay in houses that were somewhat primitive.

"I shouldn't have minded," Laura said. "I think it would have been rather fun." She was disappointed that he hadn't settled to take her with him.

"Arduina can sleep in my dressing-room while I'm away," he said; "you'll want someone near you, and Tina's room's such a long way off."

"Yes—I shall be glad to have her."

"And do talk to her sensibly and try to make her see that her parents only desire her welfare. She's fond of you—she'll listen to you."

"Yes, but I simply can't urge her to marry a man she dislikes as much as she dislikes Ettore." She spoke rather vehemently.

"I suppose not," he answered dryly. His face was grim and stern then as if her words possessed a double significance that wounded him.

Very soon afterwards he rose and went out of the room.

"He misunderstands everything I say," she thought miserably.

VII

It was almost a relief when the day of his departure came. He was to leave early in the morning to avoid the

great heat of the day, and Laura went down to the courtyard to see him start. The Zevi family had also assembled there, and the car was in readiness, for he was to motor the first part of the way. Domenico, looking very big and powerful, was waiting for his master. He pulled Arduina rather roughly to him and bade her be a good girl while he was away. He kissed her and the girl shrank a little away from him, for there was a threat in his manner as if he were resolved to stand no nonsense. He was still deeply displeased with her for her obdurate attitude towards the proposed marriage. Laura watched the scene a little nervously. Would Arduina avail herself of her father's unusual absence to make a bid for liberty—and Luigi? . . .

"Good-bye, Laura," said Paul's cold voice. He bent his head and kissed her.

"Good-bye, Paul. When do you think you'll be back?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"You'll write?"

"If there's an opportunity."

"But do you mean I shan't hear from you while you're away?"

He gave her a quick, astonished glance. Was it possible she could care whether she heard or not?

"I'll write if I can."

He got into the car. Domenico mounted beside the chauffeur. In another moment they were speeding down the steep road that dipped through the city of San Salvo, past the cathedral, and the bishop's modest palace, down the narrow cobbled streets where the children played among the chickens and goats and pigs, away across the plain that was watered by the wide, shining flow of the Ofanto, away from the Castle of San Salvo, standing remote and apart in proud massive splendor upon its lonely hill. . . .

Laura slipped her hand into Arduina's arm and together

they mounted the stairs to the top floor. But when she was once safely within her own apartment, Laura seized her round the waist and made her dance down the whole length of the long passage with her. They were both a little out of breath when they stopped. The tension caused by Paul's cold disapproval had affected her more powerfully than she was perhaps aware of, and this reaction was due to a sense of violent relief at her temporary release from it.

She was like a school-girl in the absence of her elders. Of course she was dreadfully sorry Paul had gone off like that, parting from her so coldly too at the end as if he had become absolutely indifferent to her. But it was good, on the other hand, to feel young again. She seemed transformed, and something of her old gaiety returned to her. She sang, as she danced, as if from sheer gladness of heart. Arduina looked at her a little curiously.

"I was afraid you'd be so miserable when Don Paolo went away. I never thought you'd sing and dance!"

In the face of this reproachful miscomprehension Laura found her own attitude difficult to explain.

"Oh, Arduina, don't be so *soft!* Why should I be miserable? He's only gone for a few days. And it's such a heavenly summer's morning—do let's be as happy as we can!"

She was the picture of youth, of glowing health, of radiant happiness. Oh, she would show Paul on his return how dear he was. . . . There should be no more of this foolish estrangement and misunderstanding. When he came back. . . .

Arduina gazed at her in wonder.

"She is happy," she thought a little enviously. "But of course she is. She has everything and he worships her."

It was very hard that some girls could win a young and handsome husband, rich and adoring, while others had to

make shift with an elderly stout one who had been married before and really wanted a housekeeper more than a wife. Ettore was actually only about thirty-six, but with him obesity had set in early, and his grizzled locks robbed him of any remaining pretence to youth in Arduina's eyes. When she thought of her beautiful boy-lover she sighed. . . .

Still, it was amazing that Laura could bear to part with her husband even for a few days. Surely she would be lonely and a little sad without him? But, looking at her now, half shyly and half curiously, she was constrained to admit that she had never seen her young mistress look happier or more beautiful.

But of course she was happy. Arduina never remotely suspected the rift within the lute, despite the gossip that was being freely disseminated throughout the castle concerning the strangely disunited life of the young couple.

There was something wrong, and no one could find out exactly what it was. The Roman servants who had accompanied the family south shook their heads, and admitted to a departure so precipitate it might well be called flight. All they knew was they had had only a few hours in which to pack up and prepare for the journey. Even Tina could throw no light upon the obscure cause.

But it was always a mistake, they alleged, to marry a foreigner. Don Paolo would have done better to wait, and in Rome there was Donna Estella Canelli with her fine fortune all ready for him! It was easy to see that the old Duchess was excessively displeased with the marriage and didn't like her granddaughter-in-law. They shrugged their shoulders, and were perhaps secretly a little sorry for Laura, who had won all their hearts with her fair beauty and gentle, affable ways.

CHAPTER XVIII

I

PAUL had not been gone more than a couple of days when a telegram was brought to Laura. She had never received such a thing since she had lived in Italy, and the sight of the bright, yellowish envelope gave her a curious sense of apprehension.

But it was impossible that in this short time Paul could have met with some disaster. Her thoughts turned to him with the involuntary instinctive action of a homing bird. It was the fear of this that made her for the moment turn so white. Her pulses, too, beat with a sickening violence after a pause during which they had not seemed to function at all.

She was alone, and was glad to feel that there was no one present to notice the trembling fingers with which she tore open the missive. It contained but few words, irregularly typed upon a strip of paper that was gummed upon the interior of the envelope.

"Have arrived at Vegliano do come to-morrow Charmian Karslake Hotel Miramare."

Laura put it down on the table with a relief so intense it was like the abrupt cessation of inflicted pain. Her thoughts had turned so naturally to Paul in that moment of acute suspense that she saw clearly he was really the one person, and indeed the only person, who counted for her in all the world. Still, she had been a fool to feel nervous at

the sight of a telegram; why, in the old days in London they had been things of daily occurrence, exciting neither anxiety nor curiosity! Her nerves must have suffered during these past few weeks. Ever since the day of her meeting with Rex. And Paul's absence was indubitably affecting them. She missed him more than she cared to reveal.

She shrank a little from the thought of obeying her sister's summons and going to Vegliano. Those bright, hard, dark eyes would be fixed upon her with a curiosity that would literally demand to be satisfied. Charmian would want to know, in fact, all about it—whether she was happy, how they were getting on, if Paul was decent to her, and if there was any chance of a baby. Especially the latter. . . . She would only be able to offer a dismal negative in reply to two of these questions. She wasn't happy and she didn't suppose there would ever be a baby. Paul was quite decent to her, but they had drifted apart, there was too much difference between them, too many disparate, conflicting elements. And his grandmother had made things worse. . . .

How could she bring herself to tell Charmian such things as these? Charmian, poised, successful, adored by husband and children, would certainly feel that Laura was to blame. She might even try to discover whether she had seen anything of Rex—she must have heard of course that he was wandering on the Continent since he lost both his fiancée and his job. Charmian would assuredly ask if there had been any . . . well . . . recrudescence of that old affair.

Yes, if she went to Vegliano she would be subjected to a terrific cross-examination. Charmian, by reason of her few years' seniority, always treated her like an irresponsible child; her attitude towards her was one of contemptuous affection, just as if she felt sure that without her

advice and assistance Laura would be certain to make a mess of her life.

Well, she had certainly made a mess of it, and now that Paul had gone away and she could no longer listen for his returning footsteps nor for the sound of his voice, she envisaged her defeat all the more clearly. It was final and permanent. They would never now recover the happiness they had known on their honeymoon nor the serenity of those evenings when they had motored about the Roman Campagna in the violet May dusk, speaking little but aware of a growing happiness in each other's society. It was the reappearance of Rex that had put an end to that period which, seen in retrospect, seemed to her like the beautiful fabled island that in one night of storm and disaster had vanished forever beneath the waves, and from whose watery fastness, so the legend ran, the drowned bells could sometimes be heard remotely pealing. . . .

She didn't want to relate the story of her failure to Charmian, and she knew that if she saw her, she would inevitably wangle it out of her. She would give her oceans of good advice and perhaps even write to Paul. Charmian was always fond of interfering in other people's affairs; she was so sure of her own wisdom. . . .

But Laura felt she simply couldn't let her probe her present wounds or touch her sores. She dreaded even the balm of pity and compassion. And if she told her anything at all she would have to relate the whole story: about that meeting with Rex, her drive with him, their being seen talking together in the rain at Ponte Milvio, Paul's determined action in taking her away from Rome a few days later. His anger and mortification had effectually prevented her from even trying to explain things to him; besides, in that suspicious mood he would have been little likely to believe her.

Charmian couldn't do any good. She might conceivably

make matters ten times worse by an injudicious appeal to Paul on her sister's behalf. No one could really do any good, Laura thought desolately; things had gone too far. They must stick it out as best they could, listening in anguish for the dim sounding of those drowned bells of happiness. . . .

"I can't—I won't go," she thought rebelliously.

Have arrived at Vegliano do come to-morrow. . . . The words teased her, as if they were being echoed loudly in her ears.

Of course it would be delightful in one way to see Charmian again, to talk unreservedly, to hear all her sister's news. She supposed Hugo was with her. Probably old Mrs. Karslake, most indulgent of grandmothers, was looking after the children in her beautiful Tudor manor house in Gloucestershire. Charmian was always perfectly at ease about them when they were there. Yes, on the whole it would be nice to see her again; this thought rather counterbalanced the disagreeable prospect of the inevitable cross-examination.

It never somehow occurred to her that Paul would hardly like her to go away in his absence. She would leave a little note for him, in case he returned while she was away. Perhaps, though, she wouldn't spend the night from home. She would only take a small suit-case in the event of Charmian's insisting upon her remaining.

Gradually the pieces were falling into position. It was like a cross-word puzzle—one word often gave you the clue to all the others. She began to see it would be far better to go than not to go. It would give her a delightful change. Just lately she had felt a little slack and hipped, as if the lonely life at the castle were telling upon her nerves and health. At least she would have a lovely long day by the sea.

She would beg Charmian not to ask her too many questions. She felt that she couldn't reveal even to her the growing passion of her love for Paul. To fall in love with one's own husband. . . . Charmian would assuredly tell her that she was a little fool. . . .

"And I am a little fool," thought poor Laura. "I've boiled the whole show, as Rex would have said."

No one—least of all Charmian—would believe in the complete destruction of her love for Rex. It had vanished, and in its place there had come into her heart a subtle hatred because he had separated her from Paul.

II

When Arduina appeared about luncheon-time, Laura said to her carelessly:

"How far is Vegliano from here?"

"Oh, a long way. It's a port on the Adriatic. It's where"—her voice dropped a little—"where Luigi is."

"Oh, so it is—I'd quite forgotten," said Laura, who had been trying to remember why the name had seemed so familiar to her. "Would you like to go there, Arduina?"

Arduina's face asumed a sombre, rather tragic expression.

"I should never be allowed to go. My father wouldn't hear of it. It's no use thinking about it." The light died out of her eyes, leaving them darkly mutinous.

When she was with her parents now, she heard nothing but endless discussions about her forthcoming marriage. They took it quite for granted, and Arduina was being slowly hypnotized into accepting it as her inevitable destiny.

"No one would know. We should start early to-morrow while my husband is still away. You could just tell

your mother you're going out with me for the day. She'd think nothing of that."

Now that she had begun to consider the project seriously, Laura felt an almost passionate desire to go to Vegliano. And as she couldn't very well go unaccompanied—Paul so disliked her going anywhere alone—it was quite natural that she should take Arduina with her.

The girl's evident reluctance roused Laura's obstinate spirit, making her ten times more eager for the expedition than she had been before.

Arduina gazed at her with mingled astonishment and admiration. How lovely to be as free as that—to be able to go away for a whole day, with no one to forbid it or scold you afterwards for such a gesture of independence.

"But my father would hear of it when he came back. He would be very angry with me, and Ettore would be angry too. It's all very well for you—you can do as you like—you're not afraid of anyone—your husband adores you—he wouldn't hurt you. . . . My father would think he had the right to punish me."

Laura said carelessly: "He wouldn't punish you if I explained things to him myself. Don't be a little coward, Arduina. Even if we do go to Vegliano you needn't see Luigi unless you want to."

"Things always get round. Someone would see us—my father might not wait for your explanation——"

The girl was obstinate in her refusal. She was evidently in mortal terror of her father's anger. He was a rough giant of a man who could terrorize both wife and child when he chose. But he was good-natured in the main and adored his daughter, despite the fact that he wouldn't stand any nonsense from her. On the subject of her marriage he would permit no semblance of rebellion. She was there to do as she was told.

"Don't you think it would be worth a scene just to see Luigi again?" asked Laura.

"It wouldn't be worth being beaten," answered Arduina simply.

She looked then like a very helpless child who found it easier to surrender submissively than to rebel. Evidently, too, she feared her father, who must have threatened her with those strong measures of which Paul so surprisingly approved. He, the least cruel of men, had not attempted to intercede for her or recommend a more kindly and humane treatment should she disobey and see her former lover again.

Something of the zest seemed to depart from the proposed adventure. Laura began to wonder if Paul would believe her when she told him she had gone to Vegliano to see Charmian. But of course if necessary she could produce proofs. Yet would he be likely to believe that Rex had been absent from the encounter?

"Oh, Arduina, do be a dear and come with me! I can't possibly go alone and I'm longing for a breath of sea-air. And my sister's there—she's telegraphed for me to go to her."

"You could tell her that you can't leave. You could ask her to come and see you instead."

"Oh, I don't think she'd have time for that! You see, she's yachting with friends, and I expect they've only put in at Vegliano for a very short time."

"Couldn't you ask her to meet you at Poggio? It's only a little way along the coast. No one would mind my going to Poggio."

"No, that would be absurd, Arduina, I really do want you to come with me. I'll make it all right with your father—don't be afraid."

There was an unaccustomed warmth of affection in her voice and manner that had an immediate effect upon the

susceptible Arduina. She came across the room and going up to Laura, said:

"I'll go. I'd do anything for you, Laura. Anything in the world."

Laura laughed and kissed her.

"No, you wouldn't. You wouldn't give up Luigi."

Arduina's face never relaxed. It was stony and obstinate, and almost stern in its purpose.

"Perhaps not that. Yet . . . if you wished it very much . . . if I thought it would displease you if I married him——"

"Oh, Arduina!" Laura caught the girl in her arms and impulsively kissed her. "What a darling baby you are! You aren't a bit grown-up really. One wants to pet you and give you lots of sweets."

Arduina shook her head.

"I've had to give up Luigi whether I liked it or not. But perhaps it would have been easier if you'd told me it would be wrong to think of marrying him when my parents and your husband disapproved of it so much."

"Perhaps I didn't think it would be wrong. It's so very difficult to advise another person about such a serious thing as marriage. I was given a great deal of advice at the time of my own marriage—it only made me very unhappy."

"Unhappy?"

"Yes. There were things, you see—things I couldn't explain to you. One hesitates then to interfere with another person in the same way. It doesn't do any good."

"Are you very fond of your sister? Is she married? Is she like you?" Arduina looked adoringly at the young, lovely face so close to her own.

"She's married, and, yes, I'm very fond of her. I don't think she's at all like me. She's dark. She's got two of the sweetest children you ever saw."

"Has she? She must be very happy," murmured Arduina.

She felt a strong curiosity to see this unknown sister of Laura's, and it made her all the more determined to run the risk and accompany her young mistress to Vegliano. And, after all, there would be no chance of her coming across Luigi. He spent the greater part of his day in an office; she wouldn't be likely to see him. And the prospect of enjoying a whole day by the sea in Laura's company filled her with a delicious sense of excitement and liberty.

"I must see about a car—Paul took ours with him. I suppose I can hire something in San Salvo?" Laura said, beginning to deal with the practical exigencies of the situation.

"Oh, yes, there's a garage where you can get quite good ones. My father hires one sometimes when he has to visit distant parts of the property. Shall we start early?"

"About nine, I think. Directly after breakfast. Oh, Arduina, I'm longing to see the Adriatic! I never have, you know."

"Supposing your husband comes back to-morrow and finds you've gone?" suggested Arduina, who was not yet quite convinced of the prudence of the expedition.

"Oh, I'll leave a note for him explaining things. He won't mind when he hears I've gone to see Charmian."

Yet even as she said the words a cold little doubt crept into her heart, diminishing her pleasure. Was it true that he wouldn't mind? Would he really believe that she had gone to Vegliano for the sole purpose of seeing Charmian? She would be once more up against that jealous incredulity that so tormented her.

"I think he would always let you do whatever you liked," said Arduina enviously.

"Oh, nonsense—you don't know how stern he can be when he chooses!" replied Laura lightly.

III

The morning was divinely fair, with golden lights swimming upon the river that wound across the valley, and little blue shadows in the creases of the rocky, limestone hills.

Having left word with Arduina's mother that they intended to be out motoring the whole day and would not probably be back till late in the evening, they started off soon after nine o'clock, when the July day still kept its freshness.

Laura left a little note for Paul:

"Charmian is at Vegliano and has telegraphed to me to go and see her. I'm motoring there with Arduina —we shall be gone all day.—LAURA."

Since their marriage she had never had occasion to write to him, and thus she avoided any formal beginning or ending to the letter. She hoped that he would not, however, return before they did. He had seemed so uncertain about his plans when he left the castle.

The road ran eastward to the sea, and the wide and beautiful landscape, green and golden and embroidered with flowers, was painted in colors so brilliant as to be almost incredible. From edge to edge of the horizon the sky was of a deep, stainless blue. Not a cloud anywhere, only perhaps to the east a faint pallor where it hung above the still invisible sea. The patches of flaming gorse were like tracts of golden fire upon the hill-sides. Monte Vulture was sharply etched against the sky, its flanks deeply blue and powdered with blossom.

They passed enchanting little hill-cities, bearing poetical, intriguing names, perched proudly on rocky precipitous eminences, upon which they seemed almost giddily balanced. The houses clustered in most cases around a tall,

slender brown campanile, as if seeking protection from its presence.

Presently they came in sight of the broad silver flow of the classic Ofanto, whose waters divided the green of the valley that was made fertile by its presence. Everywhere there were vast tracts of vineyards, olive and orange orchards, great fields of golden stubble whence the wheat had already been harvested, wide spaces that were lying fallow and of which nature had made a lovely garden with her careless dispositions of brilliant flowers. Dark patches of woodland garmented the lower slopes of the hills, and here and there a solitary cypress cut the landscape like a black flame.

Laura was in the maddest spirits. It was such a relief to escape from the gloomy old castle for a whole day, to feel like a girl again! She was as proud as a child of this, her first definite act of independence since leaving Rome. And then she was going to see Charmian, and it would be perfectly topping to have a long and intimate talk with someone who really did speak her own language. They would be able to talk with perfect freedom despite the presence of Arduina, whose English was still limited to a few phrases such as "good night" and "good morning." It was the thought, too, of this long day of delicious if stolen freedom spent in racing across Italy's narrow ankle that brought that soft color to her face, that extraordinary brilliance to her shining eyes.

Arduina didn't share her gaiety. She sat there by her side, silent and feeling a little frightened. She had a kind of uncomfortable presentiment that this expedition would bring misfortune and calamity upon them both. It was so odd of Laura to choose just the moment when her husband was away to fly off like this and join her sister at Vegliano. Surely the Duke wouldn't be pleased when it came to his knowledge. It might be that she would be

blamed for consenting to accompany Laura. She ought to have stood out and refused to go. But Laura had a way with her, and when she chose to put forth her wonderful charm few people, least of all Arduina, could resist her. She made you do things for her just because she was young and beautiful and attractive—even things which your conscience told you were best left undone.

There wasn't an atom of real independence in Arduina's character; she responded to authority like a well-trained dog. There was her father, and behind her father there was the Duke, who had so autocratically banished Luigi, and whose word was law in the castle. She was perfectly aware that although she might cry and make a fuss at first, she would consent to marry Brunelli when the time came, and perhaps not be so very unhappy, after all. . . .

She would have lovely dresses, of course, fashioned as much like Laura's as local talent could achieve, and then there would be some jewels and a whole cupboard of embroidered household linen. She let her thoughts dwell rather determinedly upon the material advantages of the proposed marriage, realizing that as Luigi's wife she would have had very little of anything, no dowry from the Duke and certainly no jewels.

From time to time she glanced at Laura, feeling a little embarrassed by her aspect of almost reckless excitement. She had never before seen her in such a gay mood. And for the first time a little doubt crept into her heart, emphasizing that premonition of coming calamity. Was it really true that Laura was only going to meet her sister? Or would there be someone else, the mere thought of whom could bring that color to her cheeks, that strange alarming brightness to her eyes? Arduina's Latin mind suspected at least an innocent intrigue. . . .

The car had climbed a hill, following a road that twisted

and circled till one felt dizzy. Now they were looking down from what seemed a great distance upon the sea. It lay before them like a wide sheet of sparkling sapphire, very deeply and wonderfully blue—bluer even than the sky that arched in such splendor above it. As they dipped down towards the coast, speeding along the white, dusty Roman road, the color of the sea seemed to become still more intense and beautiful. It was less like a sapphire now than a pavement of lapis edged with dazzling rims of pearl.

They passed more slowly through a beautiful little city built upon a low hill overlooking the Adriatic. The shape of it followed accurately the curve made by the summit of the hill. It possessed a wonderful cathedral and some exquisite old palaces. The streets were very narrow and the tall old houses shadowed them completely. Little dark-eyed, grubby children played on the cobblestones just as they did in San Salvo, tumbling over the chickens and dogs and goats, and an occasional pig, who shared the freedom of those steep streets with them. There was little or no traffic to interrupt their play.

Barefooted and scantily clad, with legs and arms so darkly tanned by the hot southern sun that they looked almost like little Arabs, the children stood and watched the car as it passed them in leisurely progress. They stared at Laura, who smiled at them, but their solemn little faces scarcely relaxed.

Far below them to the south they could see the harbor of Vegliano filled with shipping. The forest of masts and rigging was etched delicately against that background of fierce warm blue. The road ran alongside the shore now, and at intervals they could see the crazy little wooden piers whence the Adriatic fishermen let their square nets down into the sea. A single plank giddily poised above the water led to the little shelter that looked hardly bigger

than a dog-kennel from which the men watched their nets. The waves broke on sands that were vividly golden, the foam making a narrow, lace-like frill dividing the blue from the gold. Beyond were deep, violet headlands and the distant shapes of peaked, purple islands that looked as if they had arisen spontaneously from some mysterious marine fastness.

A faint brackish wind blew in their faces, tempering the burning, almost blistering, heat of the sun.

They reached the town and halted for a moment at the *dogana,* but the official, dressed in grey-green uniform with a long feather in his slouch hat, did not even invite Laura to open her suit-case. The delay was only momentary, and in a few minutes the car had drawn up before the Hôtel Miramare, an unpretentious-looking inn that faced the harbor and sea.

It stood at the end of a road, and beyond it there was a dusty piazza with a few palm-trees and some oleander bushes now in full blossom. Only a few people occupied the seats that were afforded scant shelter at that hour from the hot sun. The sea wind raised little clouds of fine white dust that blew down the road like silver smoke.

Laura thought she had never before seen such a parched, dry spot. All verdure except the palm-trees and the gay blossoming oleanders had been literally burnt up by the sun.

Even the sea glittered like polished brass, and afforded no relief to the eyes.

IV

There were some wicker chairs in the tiny loggia outside the hotel and in one of them a man was sitting reading. He had his back to the road, perhaps to avoid the bright glare from it and from the sea beyond, but there

was something in the shape of that dark, sleek head that gave Laura her first little thrill of alarm.

A porter came hurrying out of the hotel and took charge of her suit-case. She and Arduina alighted and went up the path.

The man rose and, glancing at them, came forward. Laura saw then that she had not been mistaken. It was Rex Forde.

His easy, nonchalant debonair attitude, not unmixed with a kind of secret triumph, exasperated her. However, she mustn't let Arduina see that anything was even remotely wrong, so she took his proffered hand and said:

"Where's Charmian? She never said that you were here."

She seemed to be looking beyond him into the empty light spaces of the hall.

"She isn't here," said Rex. "Won't you introduce me to your friend? I suppose it was too much to hope that you'd come alone!"

"This is Arduina," she said. "What do you mean by saying that Charmian isn't here? She telegraphed to me only yesterday, asking me to come to-day. What made her leave?"

"She's never been here. I sent the telegram," said Rex. "I knew you were alone. I wanted to see you again. It was my only chance." His bold eyes still searched her face. Laura shrank from their scrutiny.

"How dared you—how dared you?" she said at last. She was trembling with anger.

"Come, my dear, don't let's have any hysterics or outraged innocence," he said, with a slight sneer in his voice that impressed even Arduina disagreeably although she couldn't understand a word of what he was saying. "You knew perfectly well Charmian wasn't here—that she couldn't in fact be here, considering she only left South-

ampton a week ago! You must have guessed that I sent the message. You must have known perfectly well you would find me and not Charmian at Vegliano to-day."

Laura did not answer. Of course she had behaved like a fool; she might have known Charmian wouldn't have sent her an abrupt message like that without any previous hint of the probability of her being in the neighborhood. She ought to have known, yet how could she have known? She moved towards the car.

"Come, Arduina, I'm going home," she said.

Rex seized her arm and tried to drag her back.

"Nonsense—it's luncheon time and you can get nothing to eat within miles of this. You'd better stay and have something, and your little friend can chaperon you." The sneer had not yet quite gone from his voice despite its very genuine alarm.

"Very well, then. We'll have luncheon and leave directly after."

She was conscious now of hunger, induced by the long run in the fresh air. She moved into the hotel, followed closely by Arduina.

"For heaven's sake get rid of that girl!" Rex whispered violently.

Between him and Arduina there had arisen one of those fierce, almost reasonless, antipathies that sometimes spring up spontaneously between two human beings.

Arduina believed that she had been led into a trap. It was just as she had always privately suspected—there was no sign of Laura's sister; there was only this man with the soft voice that frightened her and the strange, furtive look in his eyes that made her think of a snake.

"I'm not going to get rid of her. I wish her to remain with me."

"Does she understand English?"

"Only very little."

The color had deepened in Laura's cheeks and her eyes were aflame with anger. Rex had tricked and duped her, but how would she ever be able to persuade Paul to believe that? This time he would certainly never forgive her. He would believe that she had purposely deceived him. It was true that Charmian couldn't possibly have arrived in Italy so soon. She had been a fool not to see through the pitiful ruse of Rex's telegram.

But Rex seemed to form a quite negligible part of the picture. He had lured her hither, but at least she could show him the immense change that had shaken her life to its very foundations since her marriage. He should have a glimpse of that new life she had built from the wreckage of the past. He must learn too that in it there was no longer the least place for him. He was a shadow—a shadow that she had once loved and now loved no more. When she contrasted him with Paul he seemed to droop into actual insignificance.

Her face was stern with resolve as she sat at a table indicated by the head waiter, near the window of the dining-room overlooking the sea.

Rex with a perfectly unconcerned expression on his face took his seat at the same table, ordered a bottle of wine, and continued to devour Laura with his eyes.

She was marvellously improved by marriage, he thought; she looked even more beautiful to-day than she had done in Rome. The warm weather suited her; she had more color and brilliance. He felt a secret triumph at the success of his stratagem.

"Don't be angry with me, Laura," he pleaded at last. "I couldn't think of any other way of getting you here."

"I don't want to talk to you. I'm going away the moment I've had something to eat. No, I don't want any wine, thank you."

She spoke in a low, controlled voice, for although

Arduina understood but few words of English she was quite sufficiently intelligent to know when people were hotly disagreeing with each other, and if they quarrelled she could hardly fail to grasp the fact. Her suspicions would be aroused . . . if they were not already definitely aroused. Indeed, there was something about the girl's attitude that both puzzled and humiliated Laura. She felt now that Arduina had accompanied her with such obvious reluctance that day because she had expected an intrigue of the kind, and didn't wish to be mixed up in it. Perhaps she had never really believed that Laura would come all that way to see her sister, nor that Charmian's urgent summons would have synchronized so accurately with Paul's departure from San Salvo. Probably she was much less surprised to find Rex awaiting them than Laura herself had been.

Arduina looked sulky, suspicious, a little defiant and morose. Naturally she would want to know who this stranger was. . . . Laura disliked to feel that she had through to-day's episode lost caste in those young, critical eyes.

The girl was, to tell the truth, more than a little jealous. Could it be that Laura, who occupied such a splendid enviable position as San Salvo's wife, was in love with this young, handsome man who sat there gazing and gazing at her so that he forgot the very food on his plate? It was easy enough to see that he was in love with her and had no thought for anything else. Arduina sincerely wished she had never lent her aid to the adventure. If trouble came of it—and how should trouble not come?—she would certainly be blamed for her own participation in it. For, young though she was, she was wise enough to realize that great issues were involved—things of far greater moment than any innocent meeting she could have planned with Luigi Bertoli. This was something that

might affect the Duke's happiness, and Arduina had the kind of feudal loyalty towards the *padrone* which still exists in Italy for the great hereditary proprietors of ancient lineage and historic name. This was something that might hurt him, bringing calamity on them all. She felt angry with Laura, and it was terrible to be angry with Laura, whom she loved so dearly. . . .

Arduina longed to know what they were saying to each other in those tense, controlled voices. They weren't exactly quarrelling, yet Laura looked undoubtedly *commossa.* The man was evidently asking her for something which she felt disinclined to give. His voice became more earnest, more passionately persuasive; sometimes he raised it a little. Once he put out his hand and touched Laura's with a swift significant gesture of entreaty. But she drew her hand sharply away as if his very touch had stung her, and glanced at Arduina as if to warn him to remember her presence. He made a contemptuous sound with his lips. The girl understood its tenor perfectly; it made her feel hot with anger and humiliation. She hated this man, and feared him too. So it was he who had induced Laura to make this mad expedition to Vegliano. All that talk about her sister was just nonsense, a blind, a lie that oughtn't to have deceived her for a moment.

And of course it wouldn't end here. There would be trouble awaiting them, if not this evening on their return, at any rate when the Duke and her father arrived back at the castle. It was always the women who were punished. The Duke would blame her too . . . he might encourage her father to punish her very severely. Domenico, great hectoring bully that he was, always meekly followed his master's advice. It would be useless for Laura to explain, to plead for her. They would all think Arduina had deliberately aided and abetted her to

go and meet her lover at Vegliano, that she had played a prominent part in the little intrigue.

Arduina's conscience had warned her against participating in the expedition; always there had been something a little mysterious about it that made her shrink from acceding to Laura's entreaties that she should accompany her. Up to the very last moment she had wanted to cry off. But she loved her, she wanted to please her, and perhaps, after all, there would be no great harm in going. . . .

Now it was as if a great black cloud had overshadowed the brightness of the day. Arduina toyed with her food, for which she had no appetite. She refused Rex's offer of wine. She only wanted to leave Vegliano as soon as possible and never see its hateful streets and blazing sea again. . . .

CHAPTER XIX

I

"BUT now that you are here you'll surely never venture to go back, Laura?" Rex's voice became slightly more vehement as he said the words. He was beginning to feel irritated both by Laura's silence and by the critical interrogation of Arduina's large, piercing eyes. "These Italians aren't like Englishmen, you know—some of them are pretty hot stuff when they're roused. And they haven't got the Divorce Court to appeal to, so they have to settle things in their own way. I made pretty sure you'd understand my message and come prepared to leave Italy with me to-night. By to-morrow morning we should be miles away—on the road to happiness."

Still no answer.

"You must be perfectly wretched, shut up in his old Castle of Otranto, as Hugo used to call it. You're really nothing better than a prisoner. Of course he brought you down there because he'd discovered somehow that I was hanging about Rome. I had a hint from the Consul too to leave. That's what brought me to Vegliano, but I knew it was useless to try to see you till he was out of the way. When's he coming back, Laura? I'm told it'll take him at least a fortnight if he wants to visit all his properties. . . ."

"Do you suppose if I went with you, as you suggest, that it would bring me any happiness?"

The scorn in her cold eyes stung him.

"Well, I dare say you'd feel it a bit at first. The

divorce and all the cold-shouldering by people who aren't a bit better in reality. But it's not half so bad as it's painted. There are too many in London now who've gone off the deep end themselves. You won't find yourself alone, my dear; and, anyhow, we could spend a year or so abroad until the storm's blown over."

His complacent assurance of her ultimate surrender amazed her. In other circumstances it might have made her laugh. But, like Arduina, she was aware that the issues involved were too mighty and too serious for jest.

"I have never had the slightest intention of running away with you," she said. "Do talk sensibly or I shall leave the room and go back home at once."

He laid down his knife and fork.

"Then why are you here? What made you come?"

"The telegram. Although you mayn't believe me, I did think it was from Charmy. If Paul had been at home I should have asked his permission."

He leaned back in his chair and rocked with laughter.

"Oh, my dear child, don't pretend to be as innocent as all that! It was all right when you were a girl, but I simply can't swallow that junk now, as the Americans say."

"It's perfectly true. If you don't believe me, I think I can convince you."

"How?"

"By telling you the truth. You won't like it, Rex; it'll hurt your pride, if you have any left."

"Tell on." He looked at her insolently, furtively, from beneath his lashes.

"I don't care for you any more. I never really cared after that day at La Cerva when you broke off our engagement. But any feeling I had left for you was killed when you wouldn't face Paul in Rome. We both saw you sneaking out of sight in the Canelli garden."

"You are singularly unfortunate in your choice of expressions," he said, his face flaming with anger and mortification.

Arduina felt a little shiver, as of sickness, pass over her. When men became very angry deeds of violence were sometimes done, and women, always so much the weaker physically, were generally the ones to suffer. She knew that Rex was very angry now; he was looking at Laura with an almost murderous expression, as if he were with difficulty controlling himself from seizing her by the throat.

But when she glanced at Laura, she felt reassured. Laura looked perfectly cool and unafraid. It was only a lover's quarrel, thought Arduina.

Yet why had she come all this long distance just to quarrel with him, to say cool, cutting things that made him angry? To gaze at him, too, with a look that suggested both contempt and dislike?

"But you did love me," he protested. "You've told me so—how many times was it, Laura? I believed you were faithful—the one faithful woman in the world. I know I treated you badly, but you'd forgiven that, hadn't you? You knew how I was pushed to it—we neither of us had a bean to bless ourselves with. It wouldn't have been fair to you to pin you down."

"I suppose I thought I loved you, but in any case it's over now. I don't love you at all, and I do love my husband. You may not believe it, but it's true. Much, much more than I ever cared for you even in the beginning. And I'm going back to him, only praying that my utter folly in coming here to-day won't have separated us forever."

She rose from her seat. She looked superb then, almost regal, he thought. He could see clearly now the value of the treasure he had so lightly rejected. She

might have been his—oh, for a little while she had been most surely his—and he had deserted her. He tasted then something of the desolating bitterness of loss.

Laura, looking at him now, could only see in him the man who for long months had so incredibly kept her from giving her whole love to Paul. She ought to have recognized ages ago that he was less than the dust, and that only Paul counted in all the world.

"Do you suppose he'll take you back now?" he broke forth vehemently, his anger getting the better of him at last. "You might save yourself the trouble of going back to him! Do you suppose he'll believe you if you say you expected to find Charmian here to-day? He isn't exactly a fool, and he's paid me the compliment of being afraid of me or he wouldn't have taken steps to get rid of me and bring you down to his old castle to be immured till I was out of the way! You had better send that child home and stay here with me. You're safer here. I shouldn't like to be in your shoes when San Salvo discovers where you've been to-day!"

"He won't have to discover it—I shall tell him myself." Paul might repulse her, refuse to believe her, yet at that moment she felt capable of doffing her armor of pride and revealing all the love and grief that were in her heart. There must still be something in her to arouse his old tenderness, even his old love.

II

"Arduina—we must be going——"

"No—no!" Rex had risen too, confronting them with pale face and blazing eyes.

Relief showed in Arduina's face as Laura announced her departure. In her anxiety for her she had completely forgotten Luigi, and she only desired to go away as

quietly and expeditiously as possible. Vegliano had become hateful to her, with its flaming sky and sea whose glare tortured her eyes; its white, dusty roads. Dimly she felt that the results of that day's work might be far-reaching in their reactions.

She wanted to find herself back in the castle, safe, secure, sheltered. All the familiar things about her. She wanted it just as much for Laura as for herself.

She hadn't understood a word of all that had been said, but she could interpret voices, intonations, and gestures, and she was painfully aware that the scene which had just been enacted was of a fiercely emotional and dramatic character. Her presence might have contributed to a certain obvious restraint and self-control which until his final outburst the man had endeavored to preserve, but except for that she could have wished herself a thousand miles away.

He loved Laura—one could read that in his passionately expressive eyes, in his voice, now persuasive and importunate, now almost violent with anger. He was trying to induce her to do something she didn't wish to do. Laura remained throughout the interview cold, unyielding, scornful, inflexible.

"You're not going! Laura—you're not going——" Rex's voice was shrill with anguish. He knew that this sight of her would be his last. She was going to pass, beloved and beautiful, out of his life; he would never see her again.

"Yes, and I hope this is the last time we shall ever meet. You've done your best to spoil my life; but let me tell you, you haven't succeeded. Come, Arduina."

She did not offer him her hand, but walked out of the room, her head held high, her body very erect and stiff. Arduina followed, keeping close to her, not daring to

glance back at Rex. Outside, the car was waiting, drawn up in the shade a few paces from the hotel.

They got in, and Laura gave the order to the chauffeur to return to San Salvo. In a few minutes they were out of sight of the hotel and of the figure that continued to watch them till the car had vanished.

"Arduina, you don't mind if we don't try and find Luigi to-day?"

Laura's voice sounded a little strained, as if the hectic character of the recent interview had begun to tell upon her nerves.

"Oh, no, I'd much rather go straight home," said Arduina with obvious sincerity.

For her the glamour of the adventure had long ago vanished, and she felt that it would be far, far better for her when she did get home to be able to say quite honestly that she hadn't seen Luigi. To see him would mean disgrace, and perhaps punishment; it wasn't a thing either that Ettore would be likely to overlook. A girl was so helpless, despite all that was now said to the contrary, unless she were strong enough to take her life into her own hands and leave home with her lover, a course that had never really possessed any attraction for her. Perhaps she was secretly aware by some process of intuition that Luigi wasn't a man to be trusted. He was shifty and capricious; one could never depend upon him. He possessed nothing but his handsome face, his infectious laugh, his ardent way of making love. Nor had he ever suggested that she should run away with him. He wasn't of the stuff of which young Lochinvars are made. He was *au fond* cautious and prudent, as are so many of the Italians, and he would never want to wed a girl who, by marrying him against the wishes of her parents, would forfeit her dowry. He had an eye to the main chance, and perhaps he had been a little glad to get away from San

Salvo, where, since the Duke's arrival, the situation had become unbearably strained.

Arduina was so deeply immersed in the contemplation of her own affairs that she had almost forgotten Laura. She could now perceive with a terrible clearness of vision that marriage with Ettore would not only offer the line of least resistance but a refuge of undeniable security. She would have a comfortable home, there would be his little son, of whom she was really very fond, to look after, and in time perhaps there would be the babies of which every Italian girl dreams.

She had tasted adventure that day and decided that its rough savor didn't suit her. Of course it would all have been much easier if she had loved Ettore; but, then, perhaps she would learn—as Laura suggested—to love him. People did . . . especially women who were often wont to look back with something of shame at the silly infatuations of their youth.

The car followed another route on the return journey, and the road, which ran in a northerly direction, for a little while skirted the coast. The blue waves still danced in the sunlight and edged the sands with little frills of lace. Far off could be seen the great mountains of the Abruzzi, with their wild and rugged shapes and peaked summits still white with snow. And in the valleys, fertile and flowery, the gay blossoms and ripening grapes mocked at the winter that reigned in those remote fastnesses.

The blue plain of the sea was broken by sails, some as white as butterflies, some of a wonderful golden hue, others again of such a deep red that they looked almost crimson. And always at intervals along the shore they could see the frail little wooden piers whence the fishermen let down their square nets into the sea, and the patient collecting and carting of the stony shingle on the

great stretches of beach by stalwart, swarthy peasants. The world's work continued ceaselessly, day by day, without interruption, no matter how greatly individuals might suffer. . . .

III

Sometimes Arduina's thoughts would turn to Laura, who was leaning back as if exhausted and inclined to slumber. What part had that good-looking, furtive-eyed man played in her life? The girl knew very little of the world, and she was utterly ignorant of the kind of world that Rex Forde inhabited; his type was unknown to her. Nevertheless, she was sensitively aware that she didn't trust him; it was as if his atmosphere were tainted and sinister. Not for anything on earth would she have left Laura alone with him, although she divined that was exactly what he had wished her to do. . . .

Suddenly she saw that their relative positions were reversed. It was she who had been called upon to help Laura, to protect her, just as if she were the older of the two. She was certain that throughout the interview Forde had been trying to persuade Laura to embark upon some nefarious course. As it happened, the suggestion had made her very angry; she had stood firm and refused with a scornful look in her eyes. But supposing she hadn't? Supposing she had yielded? Arduina held her breath with suspense when her thoughts reached this point.

For there was undoubtedly some mystery connected with their expedition to Vegliano that day. Laura must have known that this man would be waiting for her there. She had gone deliberately, deceiving Arduina as to the purpose of her journey. Supposing therefore she had set out with the determination to listen to him? Looking

back, Arduina could not but see there had been a queer recklessness in her gaiety that morning. With her resolute, defiant air, her wild, bright eyes, she had looked almost terribly alive. Now she sat there, pale, composed, inert, very quiet and still, as people are who have just thankfully escaped from some dreadful peril. She was thinking perhaps of her deliverance that day from some danger she alone clearly comprehended.

As if aware that Arduina's thoughts were concentrated upon her, Laura roused herself with an effort, and said:

"What are you thinking of, Arduina? You're as quiet as a little mouse!"

Her tone was bantering. She didn't want the girl to think too seriously of the day's happenings.

"I was thinking of that man. I didn't like him. Do you like him, Laura?"

"No—not at all. I never wish to see him again."

"Then why did you come all this long way to see him?"

"Oh, don't ask me so many questions, please, Arduina. You see, I shall have to answer such quantities when I get back."

"I wish we'd never come," said Arduina; "he frightened me when he got so angry. Men are dangerous when they get very angry!"

"Oh, an Englishman isn't so ready with his knife or revolver as an Italian," replied Laura. "I don't think I was in any danger."

They relapsed into silence. The car had turned westward now, and the distance was a little dim, for the July day, so lovely in its early beginnings, had become dull and threatening. Far off the mountains were wrapped in smothering clouds that enfolded them like chill, wet garments.

Laura's thoughts were scarcely less tormenting than Arduina's. Very soon she would have to give Paul an

account of her day at Vegliano, and more and more difficult did it seem for her to be able to convince him that she had gone thither in all innocence, believing that she would find Charmian there. And in the face of his cold incredulity how impossible it would be for her to tell him all that was in her heart—her love for him, never so great as now, her hatred of Rex who had trapped and duped her into making the expedition and who had tried, indeed, though unsuccessfully, to separate them forever. Yes, her task would be a difficult one, and perhaps she would only accomplish it to find that Paul didn't want her any more. He wouldn't perhaps go back to live in Rome. He would visit his grandmother sometimes, but Laura would always remain at San Salvo so that they might the better hide from the eyes of a curious world the disastrous failure of their marriage.

Suddenly the remembrance of that statue on the Appian Way came back to her mind, tormenting her. She saw the pale, lonely figure, her chin resting on her hand, her head turned towards Rome, from which death had torn her. A white, poignant figure amid the surrounding verdure, symbolic of sorrow and desolation and eternal exile. . . .

Paul would never invite her to return to Rome. They would spend their defeated lives amid the eternal monotony of San Salvo. When she came in sight of the castle standing grim and immense and forbidding, a dark blot against the sky, she felt about it as she had done at first—that it was a prison waiting to receive her.

She was going back of her own free will to learn the destiny that awaited her.

She was conscious now of a deadly fatigue that seemed to numb all her faculties. She wasn't afraid or repentant or anything, only very, very tired, as if something of life and strength had gone out of her body. She thought that

people who awakened to find they had had a paralytic stroke in the night, must feel as she did now.

She wasn't like the same person who had started forth so joyously for Vegliano only a few hours ago. What had possessed Rex to send that fraudulent telegram? Perhaps he had wanted to ruin her happiness—to wreak his vengeance upon Paul because he had married her. His mind must have been full of dark, sinister intentions. He hadn't even spared the woman he professed to love. . . .

Laura was very white. Her eyes were dull and sombre, her mouth firmly compressed. If she was conscious of anything it was of a sense of being cold and lonely and of going forward to encounter some dark doom.

Now the car was approaching the castle. The clouds had gathered thickly, and a thin rain had begun to fall; the wind blew it in their faces; it was sickly, tepid. When the raindrops came into contact with the hot earth they seemed almost to boil. They made the dust leap into the air so that Laura's dress was splashed with it.

Behind the castle there was a black, lurid cloud that presaged one of the fierce, terrifying thunderstorms that characterize the summer in the south.

IV

As the car mounted the steep, flagged approach to the castle Laura saw that Maria was waiting there under the porch of the chapel where she was sheltered from the rain. Perhaps she was getting anxious about her daughter, caught thus in a bad storm, and had come thither to watch for her.

Laura had seldom spoken to the woman; she was very quiet and reserved; she seemed rather to avoid her. She had none of the characteristic loquacity of the Italian.

When the car stopped she ran up to Arduina and flung her arms round her neck, kissing her as if they had been parted for many months instead of only for a few hours. She began to talk wildly, vociferously, as if the silence of a lifetime had been broken. Her small, brown hands accompanied the talk with swift, almost violent gestures. Laura could understand nothing of what she said though she divined that she was relating something of importance that must have occurred during their absence. What could it be? She watched the woman's face with a kind of slowly growing terror that seemed to fasten its claws upon her very heart. Had anything happened? . . .

Che disgrazia. . . . A disaster. . . . That word at any rate was familiar to her. She wanted to cry out and ask what it was. There was a barrier between her and these people among whom her life was spent—the barrier of speech. All Arduina's instructions could not help her to interpret this passionate volubility. *Una disgrazia*—Laura caught at the word, and like the psalmist her bones seemed to turn to water. She leaned up against the wall as if seeking support.

The mother and daughter took no notice of her. Arduina listened attentively, uttering every now and then what appeared to be a perfectly meaningless interpolation. They had forgotten her presence; in the stress of the moment they had not even the common courtesy to try to explain things to her, although she was the *padrona*—San Salvo's wife—who surely ought to be the first to be told if anything untoward had happened to him. Ah! that thought had leapt to the surface of her imaginative mind at last—piercing the veil of her subconsciousness. Something—*una disgrazia*—had happened to her husband. . . .

Some dark doom was approaching, just as that black cloud presaging thunder was slowly drifting towards the

castle as if to wreak its fury upon those ancient walls that once had survived an earthquake which had laid all the city in ruins. That was why, so her thoughts ran, the houses were all built low in San Salvo, seldom more than a couple of stories high. She wondered what had made her remember that now. . . .

These people didn't know how dreadfully she was suffering. Their handsome, dark faces were mere masks —animated masks—capable of an almost superhuman volubility. They didn't really care. They pretended to do so, but when disaster came they forgot all about you; they left you standing there, in the dark, tormented with suspense. . . . They only liked you quite superficially because you always had a smile for them. But they never forgot you were a foreigner, an alien. . . .

La signora duchessa. . . . She heard the words, catching at them as at something familiar. They were speaking of her. It did concern her then. Something had happened to Paul while she was away seeing Rex at Vegliano. A punishment. . . . She shrank from the thought. Because she had gone off that day, persuading herself it was to see Charmian without examining the matter too closely, she was never to see Paul again. He had perhaps died believing that she was false to him, that she still loved Rex. Maybe he had known that Rex was at Vegliano—he might have had a watch kept upon his movements, so determined was he to frustrate any attempt he might make to see her again. But all Paul's care and vigilance had been in vain. Rex had laid the trap and she had walked blindly into it.

A flash of lightning, followed almost simultaneously by a reverberating peal of thunder that seemed to shake the old walls, startled her from her supine inactivity. She dashed into the house and began to climb the steep flights of stone stairs. It was very dark there; she put her hand

along the wall to guide her footsteps. The world was full of loud, angry sounds, the thunder pealing overhead, a noise as of many waters in her ears. She had hardly gained the top landing when she saw a light issuing from the open door. And framed in the great old stone doorway there stood the figure of a man, waiting for her. . . .

It was Paul . . . alive, unhurt, with an expression of sombre anxiety upon his face. What did he guess? What was this *disgrazia* that had befallen them, recalling him almost immediately to the castle when he had intended to spend some little time in visiting the more remote parts of his southern property? . . .

Realizing that she was exhausted with anxiety and fatigue, he put out his arm and caught hold of her. He only just saved her from falling to the ground in that overwhelming reaction of relief from a suspense that had become physically insupportable.

He drew her into the apartment and shut the door.

CHAPTER XX

I

THE storm rattled and crashed overhead, as if some terrifying aerial battle were in progress. Flashes of lightning lit up the rooms like great serpents of flame rending the clouds asunder. It was the worst storm Laura had ever experienced, and it had come at a moment when her spent nerves seemed least capable of enduring it. Nor did the presence of Paul contribute anything to her comfort. She was aware that he was watching her, waiting perhaps for her to speak, to offer at any rate some explanation of her prolonged absence from home.

"What's happened?" she cried at last. "I heard Arduina and her mother talking. Maria was telling her something but I couldn't understand what she said, she spoke so quickly, and she looked fearfully excited. I only caught one word, *una disgrazia.* It frightened me——"

She had sunk into a chair beside a wood fire which Paul had ordered the servants to light in the smaller sitting-room, because he was afraid that Laura would be caught in the storm and perhaps drenched. It was a relief to him, too, that she should have returned when she did, just before it broke in all its fury.

"I have to go back to Rome to-night," he said. "I have had bad news of my grandmother. That was probably what Maria was telling Arduina. She has had a stroke and isn't expected to recover."

"I am sorry . . . Paul." Her lips could hardly frame the words.

"Your being out has delayed me. I ought to have started half an hour ago. But I shall motor to Lerio and catch the express from there."

"To-night? In this storm?"

"I have no alternative. I must get there as soon as possible in the hope of seeing her alive."

"I'm sorry to have delayed you——"

"It was unfortunate in the circumstances, but I've plenty of time to get to Lerio."

"Do you think you'll be gone long, Paul?"

"I can't give you any idea. It depends upon what I find when I get home."

"Couldn't I—couldn't I come with you?"

"Oh, no—you must remain here," he answered indifferently.

"Remain here—indefinitely?" She looked at him. Oh, he couldn't surely condemn her to such a fate as that! Why, she would be like that statue-woman on the Appian Way, gazing, gazing towards the beautiful, beloved, and lost city of her dreams. . . . "Paul—you can't."

"I'm afraid there's nothing else to be done. By the way, where have you been all day? Maria was getting very anxious about Arduina. She said you left quite early in the morning——"

His dark, penetrating eyes searched her face.

"I went to Vegliano."

"To Vegliano? What on earth——" He stopped short, as if an idea had suddenly occurred to him. "I hope you didn't take that foolish girl there in order to look up Luigi? Why, we had only just got rid of him, and she was beginning to seem quite docile and even happy. I hope it wasn't for that reason you went to Vegliano?"

"They didn't meet. We hadn't time to look him up, and Arduina didn't seem to want to see him either."

"If she's been trying to mix you up in this love-affair of hers, I hope her father will punish her very severely. Luigi is a man of bad character—if she married him, he would make her miserable."

"She didn't try to mix me up in it. It was all my doing. Arduina wasn't very anxious to come. She's afraid of her father."

"But you must have gone to Vegliano on her account? What made you change your mind about Luigi?"

Laura's eyes were fixed upon the ground. It certainly wasn't the moment to make confession either of her folly or of her love. Paul was angry and she knew that secretly he was blaming her.

"I didn't go on Arduina's account. I went because I wanted to. I begged her to come with me——" She raised her eyes now and looked at him entreatingly.

"Yes, but why?"

She was silent.

"You must have had a reason?"

"Yes."

"Be good enough to tell me what it was."

"I went because of a telegram—last night——"

"A telegram?" he echoed.

"I thought it was from my sister. It was signed 'Charmian.' She said she was at Vegliano—she asked me to go and see her." She stumbled over the words, almost incoherently.

"I should like to see the telegram," said Paul.

She rose and went into her bedroom and searched on the writing-table for the yellow envelope into which the message had been pasted. But it was nowhere to be found. Fearful of keeping him waiting, she went back to the salotto.

"I'm sorry, Paul. I can't find it——"

"I never thought you would!"

"Why—why, what do you mean, Paul?"

"Even if the telegram was signed 'Charmian,' you must have known perfectly well that she wasn't at Vegliano, and that someone else had sent the message."

He came across the room and stood in front of her, then suddenly he put out his hand and turned her face roughly towards him.

"Whom did you see in Vegliano to-day?" he demanded.

"I am very sorry, Paul. I came away as soon as I could. When we got there Charmian wasn't there. But I found—Rex."

"Rex!" he repeated.

There was a lull in the storm and a deep and impenetrable silence possessed the room. And across the silence that one word seemed to echo and re-echo, balefully, insistently: "Rex . . . Rex. . . . "

Paul released her face; he felt that she trembled beneath his touch. But she sat there quite motionless, her hands hanging down helplessly at her sides.

"You must have gone almost directly my back was turned!" he said. His self-control was almost terrible to witness. His voice had a dull quality that suggested a superhuman restraint.

"Arduina was with me all the time. Ask her——"

"Arduina!" He dismissed such a witness as worthless. Wasn't she devoted to Laura—wouldn't she say whatever she had been told to say?

"I am very sorry," repeated Laura helplessly.

All her dreams of making full confession to him faded. He was purposely keeping her at arm's length. When he had touched her just now, turning her face up towards his, there had been something a little rough and brutal in the gesture. He had reached breaking-point then, and she

knew it. The breaking-point of which Charmian, wiser and more sophisticated, had warned her.

"I've brought nothing but misery to both Paul and Rex," she thought desolately.

Yet it hadn't been altogether her fault; she had been tricked by a malevolent destiny into a false position. If she hadn't felt so utterly exhausted she might have tried to say some word in her own defence. But the hard incredulity of his eyes deterred her. He believed that the moment his back was turned she had made plans for meeting Rex at Vegliano. No evidence of a telegram signed "Charmian" would have convinced him to the contrary, even if she had been able to produce that flimsy scrap of paper.

"Paul, must you leave me here? I shall be so unhappy —so very unhappy. So lonely ——"

"I shall come back as soon as I can, you may be sure," he answered, disregarding her appeal. "And, by the way, I'm telling the people at that garage we shall not require to hire any of their cars again. The account shall be settled at once."

He went out of the room. Presently he returned, dressed ready for his journey. The storm had almost ceased, but in the distance the thunder still growled menacingly and dazzling flashes of lightning illuminated the hills.

"I'm afraid you'll have a bad journey," she murmured.

"Well, I don't expect it'll be very pleasant."

"Good-bye, Paul."

She lifted her face, but he did not look at her.

"Good-bye, Laura."

Love had come too late, just when his was dead. She did not say another word, but watched him as he went out of the room. Would he ever return to her? At the door he paused.

"Of course I may come back any day. You can have Arduina to stay with you as before. I'm afraid she's not much of a companion for you, but there's no one else."

"I shall like having her," said Laura.

Now he was gone. She could hear the front door shut as he went out. Presently from far, far below she could hear the purring of the engine as the car slid down the hill carrying him away into that dark, starless, stormy night.

She had not even tried to explain her action to him, had let him go from her with his heart full of anger and distrust. He had not even kissed her. Yes, there had been something final about the manner of his going.

II

But she could not remain alone thinking of Paul. She felt that the result might even mean madness. At all cost she must turn her mind to other things.

Arduina—she would go downstairs and find Arduina and tell her to come and stay with her until Paul's return. She couldn't face complete solitude now. Arduina's faithful adoration would soothe her. There was at any rate one person in the world in whose eyes she spelt perfection.

Unless of course her adventure of to-day had robbed her of even that affection. There had been moments during luncheon when Arduina had stirred restlessly and looked very miserable. Obviously she had disliked and mistrusted Rex; she must have wondered what mad secret impulse had persuaded Laura to go to Vegliano in quest of him.

The scenes of the day passed phantasmagorically

through her mind as she descended the stairs. That first wonderful glimpse of the divine blue of the Adriatic, the sky-line broken by the shapes of distant islands, wine-colored and looking like regions of faëry, mysterious, insubstantial; the sails that swam and filled before the breeze—golden sails, silver sails, sails that were almost crimson in the sunlight. The little wooden piers with their tiny shelters that looked like enlarged dog-kennels from which the square nets like the one in St. Peter's vision at Joppa were lowered. The brown, muscular peasants working in the fields or gathering up the shingle from the beach. The waves breaking in little lacy frills on golden sands. Blue and gold, and the distant sheets of cool, silver snow crowning the summits of the Abruzzi mountains. And then the return to the castle to encounter the darkness, the violence of the storm, that seemed symbolic of Paul's fierce ill-restrained anger.

She rang the bell and the door was opened by Maria. She eyed Laura with a curiosity that stung. What did she know? What did she guess? What had Arduina told her? What interpretation had she put upon Paul's action in returning to Rome without her?

"My husband has had to go to Rome. His grandmother is very ill—she isn't expected to recover. He said I might ask Arduina to come and stay with me—till he comes back."

Her voice faltered over those last words.

"I don't know whether she can come or not, *eccellenza*. It is for her father to say."

Laura felt a little impatient. She discerned a lack of eagerness on Maria's part which hurt her pride. What were they saying? What were they thinking?

"I should like to speak to Arduina," she said, and now there was a little ring of authority in her voice.

"Of course, if you wish it," murmured the woman doubtfully.

She was angry with Laura for getting her poor little girl into trouble with her father. There had been a very violent scene during which Arduina's ears had been soundly boxed. Laura's calm unconcern irritated her.

"Please come in. I'll go and fetch her. She's been crying——"

"Crying?"

"Yes. Her father is very angry with her. He—he hurt her. Just as if going to Vegliano were the poor child's fault."

"Oh, I'm quite prepared to take all the blame," said Laura easily. "I made her come."

"That won't mend matters now," said Maria sulkily. She had often felt the weight of her hubsand's hand, but to see it raised against her child was more than she could bear. Her shrieks had rivalled those of Arduina.

Maria vanished, leaving Laura in the primly-arranged sitting-room with its hard high chairs and polished table.

"Arduina—Arduina! The *signora duchessa* has come!"

Maria could be heard calling to her daughter in the passage. At first there was no response and she raised her voice and shouted: "Arduina—Arduina!"

Presently there was a little stir in the passage outside and the girl came into the room. She was crying. Behind her was the huge formidable figure of her father.

"Oh, Laura, my father won't believe me when I tell him that we never tried to see Luigi at Vegliano!"

She ran up to Laura and flung herself sobbing into her arms. Laura held the girl closely, murmuring soothing words in her ear.

Domenico watched them, his face dark with anger.

"Tell him the truth, please," cried Arduina.

Her face was crimson and smarting with pain. Her father had often threatened to strike her, but he had never done so before, and she was maddened with pain and humiliation.

"If I find she's been lying I shall beat her," said the big man sullenly.

Maria stared at Laura with reproachful anger in her eyes, as if she would have said: "Just look what you've done. No wonder San Salvo is full of stories about you and the Duke."

"No, she isn't lying," said Laura in halting Italian. "She came with me because I made her. We never saw Luigi—we never tried to see him." She laid her cool cheek against the girl's burning one. "Don't cry, dear Arduina," she murmured.

"I believe you're trying to shield her, *eccellenza!*" Domenico made a step forward as if to drag his daughter away from those sheltering arms.

"No—no—please don't touch her! Arduina has told you the truth. She didn't see Luigi—she stayed with me all the time. You mustn't punish her any more. . . ."

Still he looked unconvinced.

"But she went to Vegliano—she started off almost as soon as my back was turned. What other reason could she have for going there?"

"My sister's been yachting in the Mediterranean—she telegraphed to me. I didn't want to go alone, that was why I asked Arduina to come."

"Oh, I see. And did Arduina see your sister too, *eccellenza?*"

Laura looked at him with heightened color. The man didn't believe her then, any more than he believed Arduina's innocent recital of the day's events. He was as incredulous as Paul himself. His manner was almost insolent.

"As a matter of fact my sister wasn't there," she admitted haughtily. "We had luncheon at the hotel and left immediately afterwards. May I take Arduina up with me now? She must be tired—she's had a long day——"

"It's all very well for you to try to shield her, *eccellenza,* but if I find out that she did see Luigi, nothing can save her from receiving what she deserves for her disobedience and rebellion. We shall see, too, if we can induce Ettore to believe her story."

Laura put her arm round the girl and led her away. When they reached her apartment she bathed her face with warm water and made her lie on the sofa. Gradually Arduina's sobs grew less.

While she was attending to her Laura's thoughts were diverted from the contemplation of her suffering. They all blamed her so bitterly, but if they could only learn the truth they would see that she was being far more heavily punished than poor little Arduina. Perhaps, indeed, she would have to suffer all her life for that day's adventure.

Arduina looked up presently and said:

"It would be terrible, would it not, if Ettore refused to marry me now? Then I should perhaps never be married at all. No one would want me—they would think there was something against me."

Her dark eyes were swimming in tears that made them look very big and bright.

"But, Arduina, dear, if you feel like that perhaps you'd better make up your mind to marry him. After all, he's a good man, he can give you a great deal." She looked at her rather wistfully.

Arduina shook her head.

"He may not want me now. If he hears that I went to Vegliano he won't believe that I didn't go on purpose

to see Luigi. No one believes me when I tell them that."

"They're all making a fearful fuss about nothing!" exclaimed Laura indignantly. "I can't see that it would have been such a great crime even if you had seen him, except that you would have disobeyed your father. After all, Ettore knows that you're in love with Luigi."

She bent down and kissed the little burning face. Arduina said shyly:

"I'm not even sure that I do love Luigi now. He seemed so ready to give me up."

III

Life went on very quietly at the castle during the next few days. Laura resumed her daily walks and lessons with Arduina who was now marvellously restored to complete composure. The weather had cleared and the country lay once more burning and baking in the fierce July sunlight. During the hot hours of the day it was impossible to go out, and the hours spent by Laura in reading and working seemed to drag rather wearily.

Always she had the sense that she was waiting for something to happen. The thought frightened her a little.

Paul sent her a laconic post card every day, giving her news of his grandmother. After the first seizure she had rallied a little. There was no hope of recovery, but she was very strong, she might linger on for some time. Although she could not speak, she seemed to recognize him, to appreciate his presence.

He never, however, alluded to his probable return to San Salvo, nor did he say anything about Laura's joining him in Rome. This confirmed her private fear

that he intended to live for the future altogether in the South, visiting Rome occasionally but never taking his wife there. He was ashamed perhaps of the failure and defeat he had sustained. . . .

"I'd rather go back and live in England on my own income," Laura thought, "than remain here indefinitely without Paul. No one could say anything to me if I did."

At such moments she felt an actual nostalgia for her own country, for the grey skies and quiet green fields, and low hills. The heat grew daily more unbearable and she flagged a little beneath the dual strain.

If she could have given Paul back his freedom she would have done so. But she knew that as long as they both lived there could be no separation, no real freedom for either of them. Although she wasn't a Catholic she could at least grasp that essential fact.

IV

Don Fedele, the priest of whom Paul had spoken, had now arrived to act as chaplain while Don Lorenzo was away for his annual holiday. He was an older and a much more highly educated man, and had spent some years in France. Laura had only spoken to him about half a dozen times, but she sometimes felt that if she were in great need of advice and counsel he would be able to help her.

She left Arduina slumbering peacefully one morning and descended the stairs to the chapel in the courtyard. Only Domenico and Maria were present at Mass that day besides herself, and they both withdrew just as the last prayers were being said. Presently the little server returned to extinguish the candles on the altar, and forth-

with departed. Don Fedele came back to kneel in the sanctuary and make his thanksgiving.

Laura remembered that Paul had once said the priest was the holiest man he had ever met, and that he would always prefer to seek his spiritual counsel rather than anyone else's. She was trying to make up her mind to speak to him, for surely she could never be in more dire need of help than she was now. Lately a kind of despair had come over her, so that she had even toyed with the idea of going back to England without saying a word to her husband beforehand. Only she too shrank from advertising her failure sooner than was absolutely necessary. Rex had said that no one ever believed the marriage would turn out a success; people were perhaps already wondering how long it was going to last. A kind of pride held her back from making her defeat public. Such a confession, too, would hurt Paul. That was perhaps the strongest deterrent of all. She wanted to shield him as far as possible from all the trouble she had caused him.

Don Fedele might think it queer of her to consult him, knowing that she wasn't a Catholic. Still, he must realize by her regular appearance at Mass that she wasn't in the least antagonistic. It might be that he was aware things weren't going smoothly or happily between herself and Paul, that there was an estrangement, a temporary separation. . . . Although she had never said a word even to Arduina, she knew that gossip requires very few data upon which to base its burning calumnies. Even the servants must have noticed how things were between them, and servants all the world over, even the most faithful and loyal ones, seldom erred on the side of silence.

Whatever happened, they would certainly blame Laura. She was the foreigner, and they would agree to a man that "Don Paolo" had made an irremediable mistake in

not marrying a woman of his own country. Some of them might even recall the fact that his grandmother had never liked the marriage.

When Don Fedele rose to leave the chapel, Laura approached him timidly.

"May I speak to you for a moment, please?" she said in French.

He answered in the same language.

"Certainly. Is there anything I can do for you, madame?"

"Will you come upstairs and have some coffee? Afterwards if you can spare the time I should like to have a talk with you."

She led the way to her apartment. Don Fedele's breakfast was placed on a table in the loggia, above which was hung a thick, golden-brown awning. The air at that hour was still fresh and cool; it possessed something of a rarefied, mountain quality, vaguely perfumed with an aroma of flowers.

When Laura had had her own coffee she returned to the priest, and found him gazing out upon that incomparable landscape all a-shimmer in the bright sunshine.

Monte Vulture rose a little misty and insubstantial, as if it had not quite emerged from its slumbers; its flanks were painted with the wild golden fire of the gorse, while on its peaked summit the Cross was sharply etched against the warm blue of the sky.

It was an extinct volcano of prehistoric times; there was no record of its ever having shown any sign of the violent, perilous qualities concealed in its deep womb. But somewhere, hidden amid the mass of luxuriant verdure that clothed it, there were little blue lakes to mark the site of its ancient crater.

Laura's eyes were fixed upon the Cross. To-day it

seemed to hold for her a mystical significance, indicating the only path by which she could return to Paul.

V

"I want to be a Catholic, Father," she said suddenly, without looking at Don Fedele, but keeping her eyes steadfastly fixed upon the Cross. "I should like to be instructed."

For a moment he gazed at her in astonishment. The silence was curiously profound and was broken only by the shrill chirping of a cicala in the cypress below the window.

"This will be an immense happiness for Don Paolo. He has, I know, been praying for it, and has had many Masses said for this intention. Have you consulted him?"

"Oh, no—he doesn't know anything. And I don't want to tell him either. I should like to feel quite sure and settled first."

But—praying for it? Did he really care whether she became a Catholic or not? Did he care indeed what she did so long as she refrained from bringing disgrace and dishonor upon his name? But the thought of his prayers weakened her. He had always shown this strange solicitude for her soul; it would survive even the love he had once possessed and now lost for her body.

"You've been thinking of taking this step for some time?"

"Oh, yes, ever since my marriage. Even before. Paul took me into a church once at La Cerva when I was alone and very unhappy. I wasn't thinking of marrying him then—I was in love with another man, and he knew it." She looked down, almost in shame. How could she ever have loved Rex Forde in such manner that it had blinded her to all that was noble and splendid in Paul? . . .

"And this other man?"

"I don't care for him any more. I shall never see him again!"

She spoke vehemently, and her eyes shone with a queer angry light.

"Have you any difficulties about the faith?"

"No—none at all. I mean—I don't know very much, but I've accepted the authority of the Church, and after that I've heard it's quite easy. And since that day in La Cerva I've always believed in Our Lord's Presence in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. I felt it so strongly that day—like an appeal. I tried not to listen," she added simply.

"I think you had better begin your instructions at once. When may I come? I do advise you very strongly not to delay."

"Please settle whatever time's most convenient to you, Father."

"Will five o'clock this afternoon suit you?"

"Perfectly. Arduina's always down with her mother then."

When the priest had gone, Laura remained in the loggia, feeling excited and nervous and yet profoundly happy, with a new kind of joy that seemed to touch her very soul. She felt, too, as if an immense weight had been taken off her heart. Paul wished for it too; he had been praying for it; he had had Masses offered for this intention. Even if he didn't love her any longer, he still retained an immense, almost passionate solicitude for her soul. This was a plane upon which they could still meet. She was afraid to look farther into the future, although she realized that at least one formidable barrier would be automatically swept away upon the day when she could meet him as a Catholic. They would be nearer then in soul if not in body.

She hoped Paul would not return to San Salvo until

everything was accomplished and she had been received into the Church. Surely that would enable him to see that she didn't care for Rex any more, that she had by this action deliberately put him out of her life. Paul must surely believe then in the sincerity of her conversion.

The thought of becoming a Catholic had never been very far from her thoughts since the day when he had taken her into the church at La Cerva, realizing her vital need of spiritual assistance even more than she could do herself. It was just after her mother's death and when Rex's faithlessness had been fully revealed to her. It had seemed to her in that hour that she had lost everything and was denuded of all she had once passionately cared for. There was surely no one in all the world so robbed and dispossessed as she. And yet it was at that most critical moment of her life that she had been forced to feel the consolation, the immense gifts offered by the Catholic Church. Never since that day had she been coldly doubting, and when she had made the promises which the Church exacted at the time of her marriage, it had been not only without rebellion or indifference but with a strange secret joy because her unacknowledged love for it had been called upon to make a practical demonstration of devotion. . . . She had rejoiced to think that even if the complete gift of faith were ultimately withheld from her, she could at least promise to bestow it upon any children that might be born to her.

Once she had liked to think that Paul would be by her side when she made her abjuration. There was no chance of that now; yet she felt that however alienated and indifferent he might be, he would at least receive the news with satisfaction. He was praying for her conversion; he was having Masses said for this intention. The thought seemed to bring him a little nearer.

VI

Even to Arduina, Laura revealed nothing of her intention, and the girl was fortunately so deeply engrossed with her own affairs just then that she scarcely observed Don Fedele's daily visits. She spent a great deal of her time with her mother, although she was always available when Laura wanted a companion for her morning and evening walks.

The mid-July weather was very hot so that it was scarcely possible to go out between the hours of ten and six.

One evening when she came up from visiting her parents, Arduina entered the room, looking flushed and excited.

"Laura, I am betrothed to Ettore. We shall be married on the Feast of the Assumption."

Laura kissed her. "Oh, Arduina, I'm so glad. I hope you'll be very happy."

The discontented, sulky expression had quite vanished from the girl's face. She stood there smiling, and with a touch of pride in her demeanor.

"You *are* happy, aren't you?" pursued Laura, feeling suddenly a great deal the older of the two.

"I don't know. I feel bewildered. But, yes, I think I'm very happy. They are all so pleased and Ettore loves me very much. It's a great thing to make so many people happy. My father is delighted—he has never been so kind to me before."

The color deepened in her soft young face.

"I'm so glad for your sake, Arduina."

"I'm to have a lovely white dress of charmeuse and a lace veil. Ettore is to give it to me. Does the bridegroom give the bride her wedding dress in England, Laura?"

"No. Her parents provide it. And if she hasn't any parents she buys it herself."

"With us the bridegroom gives it, and the dress for the wedding journey too. I'm to have a brown *crêpe de Chine* for that—it's to be sent from Rome from one of the big, big shops there. But I have to supply the linen for the household—that'll be easy because my mother has been preparing it for years. She has a cupboard full of it, the loveliest sheets and pillow-cases with an 'A' embroidered upon them. And now they'll be mine. Ettore says we shall have more than we can use because he has such quantities already. I suppose they belonged to his first wife."

She was glowing with pride at the thought of her new possessions and at the prospect of having a house and husband of her own. Ettore, too, was in a curiously humble mood, as if his one desire was to please her. He seemed indeed quite afraid of annoying her.

"The nuns are making my *lingerie*. Such fine, pretty things and so many of them. Real silk stockings, Laura —those are coming from Naples. And lovely little shoes. The Duke gave my mother the money to pay for it all. And he is giving me my dowry too, so that they should not impoverish themselves. I shall be quite rich. Ettore will find he has married a rich woman instead of a poor one!"

Laura kissed her again. She could not help smiling; the girl was such an odd mixture of childishnes and maturity. But she looked extraordinarily pretty in her newfound happiness, and evidently bore no resentment for the harshness that had been thought necessary in order to effect a separation between herself and Luigi. She was basking now in love and approval, and expanding like a flower beneath these benign influences. It was delicious to be loved and praised and made to think she was quite

important, instead of feeling herself in disgrace and liable to be punished like a child. But her puny rebellion was at an end, and everything was settled to everyone's satisfaction, including apparently her own.

"I shall be as happy as you are, Laura. The girls here will envy me my beautiful home and all my lovely dresses and shoes. Ettore is going to buy a car—one of those little Fiats—and then he says he will take me out whenever I like. Oh, I shall never be dull and depressed any more. I shall have so much!"

When she had gone—saying that her mother wanted her, there was still so much to do, and Ettore was coming to supper with them—Laura felt a little saddened. Those innocent words: *"I shall be as happy as you are, Laura,"* echoed in her ears. If only Arduina could see that she wasn't happy; she was very unhappy, the most miserable woman on earth. She was wasting these glorious summer weeks alone at San Salvo when she might have been in Rome with Paul. He made no sign of ever wanting her; perhaps this separation was indeed a relief to him. He had grown tired of the woman whom he believed to be faithless to him in thought if not in deed.

CHAPTER XXI

I

DON FEDELE, kindly and assiduous in his very practical teaching, kept Laura from despair during the weeks that followed. Despite the fact that she flagged a little in the unaccustomed heat, she applied herself to her spiritual studies with an energy that astonished him. This was no mere caprice, as he had at first imagined, a means of whiling away a dull period with her husband away and no companion except Arduina available. Laura was evidently most deeply in earnest, and he often wished that she had not bound him by that promise not to tell Paul of the progress of events.

"It would make him very happy," he entreated.

"Not yet. Not till I've been received. I don't want him to know till then."

The news came that the old Duchess was worse. A second stroke had supervened, depriving her of all semblance of consciousness; her thin old body was as stiff and helpless as if death had already informed it. Paul could not leave her; he still clung to the hope that some gleam of consciousness or recognition would return before the end, and he knew what it would mean to her then to realize that he was near her.

Laura wrote to him punctually. They were letters such as the merest stranger might have written. She told him of Arduina's betrothal, and that the girl seemed extraordinarily happy and was deeply grateful to him for the generous dowry he had bestowed upon her. The wedding

was fixed for the fifteenth of August. She saw much less of Arduina now than heretofore, she informed him, as the girl was constantly occupied in helping her mother with all the preparations for the marriage. The July weather was very hot in San Salvo; she wished there had been a shady garden at the castle. But she had no reason to complain—she was quite well, though people wondered why she had not gone away for the conventional *villeggiatura*. She never said a word to indicate that she missed Paul or that his absence was causing comment.

Few Northerners flag during their first hot summer in Italy. It is only when the experience is repeated for several years without intermission that the heat begins to tell upon them. At first they are indifferent to, and unaffected by, the fierce, scorching heat of the sirocco which so tortures the nerves of the older inhabitants of the country. Laura would indeed have enjoyed the glorious weather, the days and weeks of wonderful, uninterrupted sunshine, had Paul only been there to share these things with her. But he remained in Rome, spending long hours in that darkened chamber where the old woman lay between life and death, waiting patiently for the slightest gleam of recognition or recovered consciousness.

He put the thought of Laura resolutely from his mind. She was safe; she did not seem unhappy; she showed no sign of desiring his presence. When he thought of the future that some day would inevitably have to be faced, his heart sank a little.

It seemed so impossible for them ever to make a success of their life together. Always between them there would be the dark shadow of Rex, and of Laura's love—imperishable, as Paul had now compelled himself to believe—for the man who had once rejected her.

Laura had never loved him, and he had persuaded her to marry him at a moment when her whole life seemed to

be in a state of flux. She had lost her mother, her fortune, and Rex. She had no home and seemed incapable of making a new life for herself. He had taken advantage of this state of weakness and uncertainty and had urged her to marry him. He ought to have realized the danger with one so young, so ardent, and of such an imaginative and passionate temperament.

In his judgment she still loved Rex, and it was only a sense of duty, tinged perhaps with gratitude, that prevented her from leaving her husband and throwing in her lot with Forde forever.

Duty and gratitude. . . . He had no need of these things from her. He wanted all her love, and nothing else would satisfy him. When he thus reviewed the situation, it seemed to him one of those entirely hopeless ones which only death can remedy.

II

Late one July evening Don Fedele received Laura into the Church, in the little chapel attached to the castle.

It was a very simple ceremony, and no one was present except Arduina, who alone had been admitted to the secret and who now acted with intense pride as sponsor. To the casual and unbelieving spectator no hint of the profound significance of the little soul-drama thus being enacted would perhaps have been vouchsafed. But to Laura it signified the mystical emergence from her old life of nebulous shadows and obscure, uncertain paths into a glorious, shining new world. Faith had come to her long ago, but only of late had she experienced this imperious need to make practical avowal of it, this ardent desire for a closer, more intimate association.

She went through the little ceremony as one in a dream. Even Paul was almost forgotten in that hour. It was a

time when the soul was quite alone, as in the moment of birth and death. No mere human contacts could affect it, or mitigate for a moment its proud and supreme isolation.

When it was over, Don Fedele said: "To-morrow at Mass I shall give you your First Communion."

Laura could hardly believe that those words had actually been addressed to her. They seemed incredible. She went upstairs, still feeling as if she were one of the protagonists in a little dream-drama that had no contact with reality. Even Arduina didn't venture to approach her again that night. She had a dim conviction that Laura would wish to be left entirely alone.

Laura rose very early on the following day; she was ready long before it was time to descend to the chapel for Mass. Moved by some impulse she could hardly explain to herself, she put on the white *crêpe* dress she had worn at her wedding. On her head, instead of a hat, she wore a veil of white tulle, such as the little First Communicants wear for that greatest of all events. Laura looked very young and girlish in this attire, almost younger than she had done when she married San Salvo. The dress, too, hung a little loosely upon her; she had grown thinner since her marriage.

Arduina met her at the chapel door, sombrely attired in black, with the usual black lace veil on her head.

They had not long to wait, for punctually at eight o'clock Don Fedele came in, and going up to the altar began to say Mass in a low and rapid tone. He had no congregation that morning except Laura, Arduina, and the small, competent boy who acted as server.

The first Mass at which the convert assists after his reception into the Church must differ inevitably in his regard from all those that he has previously heard. He participates for the first time in all the graces and indulgences attached to the Mass. He is as one who has come

into his kingdom, into full and undisputed possession of all its gifts and privileges, after long exile in the outer darkness and cold.

When Don Fedele said in a slightly raised voice, *"Domine, non sum dignus,"* those unforgotten, ever-commemorated words of the Roman centurion, Arduina touched Laura lightly on the arm. They rose and went up to the altar-rails, kneeling there side by side.

When she raised her eyes, she saw that Don Fedele had turned towards them while he made the sign of the Cross over them, pronouncing the words of absolution. Then he held up something round and white and shining in his hand. She heard his voice again, very clear and distinct:

"Ecce Agnus Dei, ecce qui tollit peccata mundi. . . ."

Then she saw him advancing towards her. . . .

III

Laura was so intent upon her Communion, so unaware indeed of anything else in the world except this tremendous Gift that had at last been bestowed so royally upon her, that she never heard a slight stir near the door. Footsteps, voices subdued and hushed, followed by a complete silence.

She went back to her seat, holding that august Treasure in her heart, scarcely daring to move or breathe. Her pale hands were folded, her eyes fixed upon the ground. She moved as one in a trance, utterly oblivious of all that was going on around her. A great peace informed her, quite unlike anything she had ever known; a glow, a warmth of love and welcome, that were as indescribable as they were authentic. How could one not give back love for love—welcome for welcome—sacrifice for sacrifice—if need be suffering for that Suffering which had purchased the Redemption of mankind? How could one not believe in this splendid, wonderful, terrible teaching of the

Catholic Church—a teaching that from the very moment of its first institution had encountered coldness and doubt so that afterwards "many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more"? The hardest of all the hard sayings proposed for the belief of man, yet surely too the most tender, the most loving, the most compassionate. . . .

Laura knelt there for a long time without stirring. She was not conscious of her body at all; it didn't seem to exist; it was without sensation of fatigue. She seemed to be rapt into some mystical colloquy that had neither contact nor connection with anything of earth.

Mass was over and Arduina rose quietly and went out of the chapel. Don Fedele returned to make his thanksgiving, kneeling on a *prie-Dieu* close to the altar. Then he, too, went away, softly so as not to disturb that kneeling, motionless figure. . . .

Still Laura knelt on, her face bowed upon her hands.

At last a movement not far from her aroused her. Turning her head sharply, she became aware of a figure kneeling a few paces from her. Her hands dropped to her sides; she looked almost alarmed, like a child who has been abruptly awakened from a deep and encompassing dream.

Almost with terror she realized that the motionless figure kneeling there in such profound meditation was Paul. For the moment her heart beat so suffocatingly she simply hadn't the strength to stir. She kept thinking: "It's Paul. . . . I wonder why he's come back without telling me first. What can he want? What can have happened?"

Was she to be called upon so soon to pay for her little hour of complete serenity and happiness and recovered peace? What had he come to say to her? . . .

If he would only turn his head and look at her, give her some sign that he was at least aware of her presence!

. . . But of course he must have seen her when he entered the chapel. She wondered how long he had been there. He was praying; his lips moved a little; his fine profile was tilted back.

"Paul . . ." she whispered at last, unable any longer to bear the tension. The sound was clearly audible across the profound silence that reigned in the chapel.

He rose quickly and came towards her and laid his hand on hers with a reassuring gesture. So he had not come in anger. . . . His eyes as they rested upon her were very soft.

"Are you ready? I was afraid of disturbing you."

She followed him out into the now deserted courtyard. The brilliant sunlight after the dusk and gloom of the chapel smote her eyes with a pang of blinding pain. She felt a little dazed, as if she had not yet fully emerged from that mystical, incredible dream that had held her so closely.

They looked down upon the city lying ablaze in the sun, the golden campanile of the cathedral with its glittering cone-shaped spire that in the white glare had something of the appearance of an Oriental minaret; the red roofs and plastered walls of the houses grouped around it; the bright verdure of the little gardens; Monte Vulture leaning its sharp, spear-like summit against the dazzling fiery blue of the sky. . . .

IV

Paul slipped his arm in hers and together they slowly mounted the stairs to the top floor. He went into the salotto with her and shut the door.

"How is your grandmother?" she asked. The dream still held her; nevertheless, she seemed dimly to recall the fact that long ago, and as it were in some previous ex-

istence, Paul had been summoned away on account of illness— the illness of someone near to him. It had happened immediately after her return from Vegliano; he was angry, they had parted estranged. She longed to know what had brought him back to her now.

"She died yesterday," he said, crossing himself. "I couldn't get away sooner. We had known for some days that the end was very near. She didn't recover consciousness before she died, as we hoped she might. I wanted to come to you before—to fetch you——"

"To fetch me?" she echoed.

"Yes. I had a visit from Charmian a few days ago. She came from Venice for one night—she wanted to explain things to me."

"Charmian!" The sense of unreality deepened. What could Charmian have had to say to Paul? Of such urgency, too, that she had gone all the way from Venice to Rome to say it? . . .

"She had seen Forde in Venice—had come across him almost starving she said—she and her husband sent him back to England. It seems he'd made full confession to her about that day at Vegliano—he told her that he'd deliberately deceived you in the hope of separating us. I am very sorry, Laura—forgive me—I've wronged you. . . ."

She moved a little closer and put her hand into his.

"Then when I went into the chapel this morning and saw you kneeling there to receive Holy Communion I realized more than ever how much, how deeply, I had misunderstood you. Can you ever forgive me?"

She was a little faint from her long fast; there was a sound as of many waters in her ears. During his absence she had often dreamed of Paul, and always in her dreams he had come back tender and loving as in the first days of their marriage, so that she had awakened to wonder

whether the terrible estrangement had really happened or whether it too belonged to the region of dreams.

He drew her to a sofa and they both sat there, she leaning against him, her head on his shoulder.

"Paul—say that you love me. . . . I love you so much. Since our marriage I've never really cared for Rex —I'd even learnt to hate him because I knew he was trying to come between us—he couldn't bear to think of our being happy together. Only when you were angry it was difficult to explain things to you especially as I believed that you didn't care for me any more!"

"Didn't care for you any more?" he exclaimed in dismayed astonishment. "Do you suppose a man can change as quickly as all that?"

"Rex did," she reminded him. "I began to think I was one of those women who can't keep anyone's love for very long."

"You really doubted my love for you?"

"Yes. If I hadn't I should have told you long ago that you were the only one who mattered to me in all the world."

She was smiling at him now with all the old confidence; her eyes were shining and happy as he first remembered them and in her face there was a deep calm, a restored serenity that seemed to transform her and render her in his eyes more than ever beautiful and adorable.

"And I was so afraid that you were still thinking of Rex—that you'd learnt to hate my love," he said. "Oh, Laura, it's been like death without you! I've missed you so much all those long weeks in Rome."

"And I've missed you," she said; "all the same I hoped you wouldn't come back before I was received into the Church. That only happened yesterday, Paul. . . ."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I think I wanted it to be a secret—even from you."

He drew her close to him and kissed her.

"Laura beloved, we shall be happy now. Nothing can ever come between us or divide us again."

She murmured contentedly: "Nothing—nothing."

"You can't think how I blessed Charmian for coming when she did. She wanted me to telegraph to you and ask you to return at once, but I wasn't sure—I thought I'd better wait and fetch you myself. She said she couldn't bear to think that things weren't going smoothly between us, especially as she had gathered from your letters that you were learning to care for me too. And then when Rex explained everything to her——"

"Ah, poor Rex," she said, with an impulse of pity.

"Yes, but Hugo's been awfully kind to him. He's found him a job in Canada—he hopes now he'll make good."

It was a relief to them both to think that Rex hadn't gone under completely; he was young and had been offered a fresh chance. There was still hope for him, and in their immense happiness they could find pleasure in the thought.

For a long time they sat there, saying very little. Laura leaned against him; his hand held hers; sometimes he turned and kissed her uplifted face, so close to his own. They seemed to be looking forward fearlessly to that new life which was beckoning to them and from which all doubts and misunderstandings had forever been swept away.

Sometimes her thoughts went back a little to that dinner-party in her mother's house in London where she had first heard San Salvo discussed. The Castle of Otranto—and then Hugo's voice saying with careless irony: "Women are so incurably romantic in their reactions." Surely

never from the moment of her first meeting with Paul had life ever seemed quite the same to her again. Love had begun then for them both, and here in the "Castle of Otranto" it was to bring them its perfect fulfilment of happiness.

THE END

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